

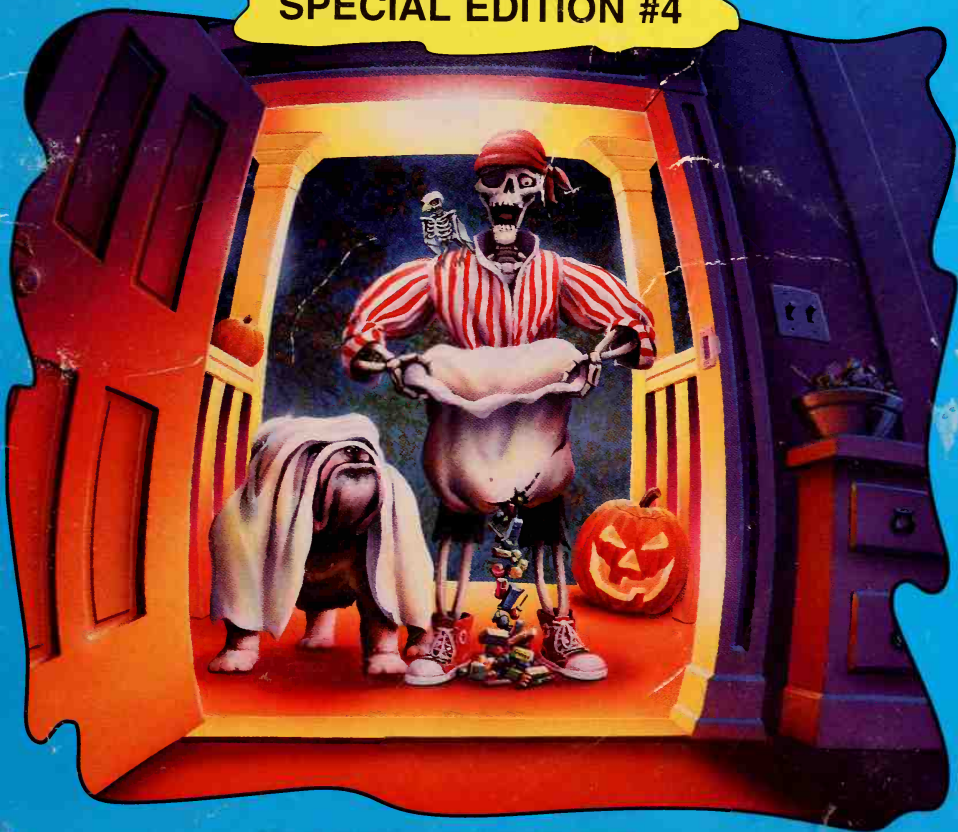
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R.L. STINE

SPECIAL EDITION #4



TEN SPOOKY STORIES

SCHOLASTIC

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TEN SPOOKY STORIES

R.L. STINE

AN
APPLE
PAPERBACK

SCHOLASTIC INC.
New York Toronto London Auckland Sydney

A PARACHUTE PRESS BOOK

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ISBN 0-590-73908-5

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12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

6 7 8 9/9 0 1/0


Printed in the U.S.A.

40

First Scholastic printing, September 1996

CONTENTS

Pumpkin Juice	1
Attack of the Tattoo	14
The Wish	29
An Old Story	44
The Scarecrow	58
Awesome Ants	73
Please Don't Feed the Bears	87
The Goblin's Glare	99
Bats About Bats	111
The Space Suit Snatcher	123



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PUMPKIN JUICE



I screamed when I pulled open the kitchen door.

A lime-green creature stood on the back porch. A springy antenna sprouted from its head and wobbled in the wind. A third eyeball peered at me from above its nose.

A red eyeball.

"I come from outer space," it muttered to my cat, Scout. "What kind of furry creature are you?"

Scout stared at it. Then she began to purr. She twitched her tail and strolled outside.

"You can't fool her, Frank," I told the space creature. "She knows your voice."

Frank is my best friend. And tonight was Halloween. Soon we would go trick-or-treating together, as we always do.

Frank picked up a fat orange pumpkin and stepped into the kitchen. "What's the pumpkin for?" I asked.

"We're going to make something." Frank set

the pumpkin on the table. He pulled a booklet from his costume pocket. "Check this out, Charlie."

I took the booklet. The words were all faded, but I think the title was *Monster Brews to Bring Out the Best in You on Halloween*.

"Hey, cool. But what exactly is in these brews?" I asked. "Chicken hearts and bat wings?"

"Read page six," Frank told me. "'Pumpkin Juice Supreme.'"

I flipped the pages and found the recipe for Pumpkin Juice Supreme. "'The flesh of a ripe pumpkin,'" I read. "'Milk. Molasses. Butter. Garlic and chicken broth.'"

"See?" Frank said. "No rat tails. Just regular stuff." He took a carving knife and stabbed it into the pumpkin. "Let's make some."

A mix of pumpkin and garlic and chicken broth sounded pretty disgusting to me. But I gathered the other ingredients while Frank chopped up the pumpkin.

By the time we finished getting everything ready, the kitchen was a disaster area. Molasses oozed down the counters. Garlic skin floated in puddles of chicken broth. And pumpkin slop was everywhere.

"Okay. We're ready," Frank announced. He checked the booklet. "Two cups of pumpkin guts."

I scooped up some guts in my hands. The slimy

stuff slithered through my fingers and dripped down my wrists. "This is really gross!" I declared.

"Yeah, but we can't quit now." Frank tossed another glob of guts into the blender. Then we added the other stuff.

Frank stuck the lid on the blender and stabbed the button. The blender roared. The pumpkin mix whirled faster and faster.

He stopped the blender and took the lid off. I stared at the slimy, yellow-orange slop inside. My stomach heaved.

"This was your idea, Frank," I told him. "You drink it first. Just don't puke all over the floor."

Frank poured the mixture into two glasses. "Here goes nothing!" He picked up a glass, tipped his head back, and drank.

"Well?" I asked.

"Not bad," he told me, licking his lips. He gulped down the rest of it. "Actually, it tastes good! Your turn, Charlie."

I took a deep breath and held it. As I tilted my glass, the thick slop slithered toward my lips. I closed my eyes and forced myself to take a sip.

Then I took another sip. And another. Frank was right! The stuff tasted good! Sort of like sweet soup. Very thick. Must be the molasses, I thought.

After I finished, we each drank another glass. Then we stared at each other. A minute went by.

"Feel like it's bringing out the best in you?" I asked.

"No, but I sure like the taste."

"Let's go trick-or-treating," I said. "It's Halloween, remember?" I threw my vampire cape around my shoulders and pulled him out the door.

Outside, a full moon hung in the sky. Kids dressed as ghosts and skeletons and werewolves crowded the sidewalks.

At the first house, the Tylers gave us three bite-sized candy bars apiece. I felt hungry, so I ate one as we walked to the next house. We got more mini candy bars there.

I still felt hungry. I ate a bite-sized Butterfinger. Then a Baby Ruth.

Feed me! my stomach seemed to cry. *More!* Before I even finished the first Baby Ruth, I took another one from my bag and shoved it into my mouth.

"Weird," I mumbled as I chewed. "I can't get enough to eat."

"Me either." Frank's mouth was dripping with chocolate and caramel too. "Let's hurry and get some more!"

The Munson twins, Sally and Cindy, opened the door of the next house. Mrs. Munson stood behind them holding a tray of candy bars.

Full-sized candy bars! Snickers. Milky Ways.

"Trick or treat," I growled in my vampire

voice. My stomach growled too. My mouth watered. A string of saliva dribbled over my lips.

I wasn't just hungry. I was starving!

The saliva dripped onto my chin. I tried to suck it up. "Trick or treat!" I growled again.

Cindy dropped a candy bar into our bags.

Frank stared into his bag. "One?" he grumbled. "Is this all I get? Just one?"

Mrs Munson frowned. "That's how we do things, Mr. Spaceman. Don't be greedy."

She started to close the door, but Frank shoved it open. Then he scooped about ten candy bars from the tray and ran back down the steps!

The twins screamed in disbelief. Their mom shouted angrily.

I turned around and chased after Frank. "Give me some of those!" I shouted. I didn't care that he had stolen the candy. My stomach felt so empty. So hungry. All I wanted was food!

"Get your own, Charlie!" Frank snarled. He started to rip open a 3 Musketeers.

My stomach screamed at me to eat. I snatched the candy bar from Frank's hand. As I raced away from him, I shoved the candy bar into my mouth, paper and all!

I couldn't chew fast enough. Chocolate oozed out of my mouth. A big gob of it slid down my chin and plopped onto the sidewalk. I picked it up with my fingers and licked it off as I kept running.

You just *stole* a stolen candy bar from your

best friend, I told myself. You just ate paper and chewed-up goo from the grimy sidewalk. What's the matter with you?

I didn't know. And I didn't care! My stomach wouldn't let me care! It wouldn't let me think about anything but food!

I hurried to the next block and pounded on the door of the first house I came to. A little boy opened it. He held a basket of lollipops.

"Lollipops?" I cried. "That's not enough! You have to have something better than that!"

Before he could stop me, I shoved my way into the house. I heard him yell. But I kept going, down a hallway and into the kitchen.

I yanked open the refrigerator. Eggs! Raw eggs! I cracked one open and gulped it down. The thick, gooey white spilled down my chin. I licked it off and reached for another egg. Then I spotted a plate of greasy liver and onions.

Yes! my stomach screamed. *Meat!*

As I reached for the liver, I saw something strange.

Thick, black hair had sprouted on the back of my hand.

I checked my other hand. More hair! I felt my face. Thick, scratchy hairs covered my cheeks and chin. Even my forehead!

But I couldn't stop to think. I had to eat! I snatched up some liver and shoveled it in.

“Who do you think you are, you little beast?” a voice shrieked at me.

I dropped the liver and spun around. The little boy and his mom stood in the doorway. She held a broom in her hands. “Get out of my kitchen this instant!” she screamed. She raised the broom and swung it at me.

I ducked. Before she could swing again, I grabbed another handful of liver and ran out of the house.

Beast. She had called me a beast.

And she was right!

The pumpkin juice! I thought as I gobbled down the liver. That’s what did it! The booklet of monster brews didn’t promise to bring out the best in me.

It promised to bring out the *beast* in me!

And it worked!

I knew I had to do something. But I couldn’t think about anything but food.

As I dashed across the yard, I tripped on a rock. Splat! I sprawled into the grass face first. I started to climb up.

And saw a long, fat worm inching its way along the ground. A thick, slimy, juicy worm. Better than candy. Better than liver!

I lowered my face to the ground. I stuck out my lips and sucked the worm out of the grass in one big slurp!

"Oh, gross!" somebody cried. "Did you see that?"

I glanced up. Four kids stood a few feet away, watching me. When they saw my face, they screamed and ran off.

My face! I thought. I felt it again. The hair had grown longer — much longer. My hands and arms were covered with it.

"Nooo!" I cried. I leaped up and began to run. But I didn't know where to go or what to do. I was a beast. The more I ate, the hairier I got! And the more food I needed!

Eat! my stomach demanded. *Eat!*

I ran down the street. And I snatched the candy bag from a little boy dressed as a pirate.

What I really wanted was another worm. But candy would have to do. For now.

I ran into a dark alley and turned the bag upside down. Candy and cookies and gum spilled out. And a popcorn ball. I reached for it.

Whack! A hairy hand got to it first.

But not *my* hairy hand. I glanced up.

"Frank!" I cried. Thick bristles of hair covered his face and hands, just like mine. "You know what happened, don't you? It's the pumpkin juice. It turned us into beasts!"

"Yeah," he muttered. He gobbled down the popcorn ball and smacked his lips. "Hungry beasts." He reached for a cookie.

"It's mine!" I hissed. "Keep away from it!"

"Try to make me!" Frank leaped for the cookie. I leaped for Frank. I landed on his back and pounded him with my fists. We rolled around the cold alley, kicking and hitting. Snarling at each other like wild animals.

Finally, I got my arm around his neck. I began to squeeze.

No! I thought. Frank's your best friend!

But I couldn't stop. I squeezed tighter.

Tighter.

Then I saw a small, shadowy figure in the alley. A small figure with four legs and pointy ears. Gray fur. A long tail.

Scout, my cat. She sat down and meowed at me.

I let go of Frank and dropped to my knees. I held out a hairy hand. "Here, Scout, Scout," I whispered. "Come to Charlie!"

Scout's golden eyes narrowed to slits. She flattened her ears and whipped her tail back and forth.

"Come on, Scout!" I urged.

Scout arched her back and hissed. Then she growled low in her throat.

She doesn't trust me! I thought. She thinks I'm after her!

And she's right!

I've had Scout since she was a ten-week-old ball of fur. She sleeps on my bed. She purrs in my ear to wake me up. She rubs against my legs when I come home from school.

I love her.

And now, I wanted to *eat* her!

Scout snarled again. "She's going to run!" Frank yelled. He dived for her.

"Yeowwrl!" Scout raked her claws at his face. Hissing and spitting, she leaped over my shoulder and bounded down the alley.

"Get her, Charlie!" Frank yelled. He started to run, but I grabbed him and spun him around.

"No, Frank!" I cried.

"But I'm starving!" he moaned. "Charlie, I ate a slug! I liked it! And I want more!"

"I ate raw eggs and a worm!" I told him. "And we almost ate my cat! Frank, we have to do something!"

"I know, but what?"

"The booklet!" I cried. "Maybe it has some kind of cure in it!"

Frank pulled the booklet from his pocket. His hairy hands shook as he flipped through the pages. "Willow Branch Soup . . . Orrisroot Casserole," he muttered. "Charlie, you were right — 'Remedies and Cures'! And here's the one for Pumpkin Juice. Milk, sugar, eggs, cinnamon, nutmeg — uh-oh!"

"What?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

"We need pumpkin flesh from the *same* pumpkin!"

I almost panicked. But then I remembered.

"We left plenty of it in the kitchen, Frank! Come on, let's go!"

I grabbed a cookie. Frank snatched up all the chocolate. We wolfed them down and raced back to my house. We burst through the door and into the kitchen.

"Oh, no!" I cried.

The place was spotless. Clean counters. Empty table. Sparkling blender. No slimy pumpkin guts anywhere.

"Gotta eat!" Frank whimpered. He dropped to his knees in front of Scout's bowl and slurped up her cat food.

I dug through the garbage can and found some moldy bread.

"Is that you, Charlie?" my mom called from upstairs.

"Yeah, Mom! And Frank's with me!" I found the empty cat food can and began licking it. "Mom? What happened to all the stuff we left in the kitchen?"

"You mean that mess? I cleaned it up!" she called down. "Which is what *you* should have done!"

Frank whimpered again and raced to the refrigerator.

"Mom?" I hollered. "What about the pumpkin? The flesh, I mean!"

"Yeah, flesh!" Frank muttered. He pulled out a package of raw hamburger meat.

"I baked a pie!" Mom yelled. "It's in the oven!"

I ran to the stove and pulled the door open. A pumpkin pie sat on the rack. "She cooked our pumpkin, Frank!" I moaned. "What'll we do?"

"We'll eat this instead!" Frank ripped at the plastic wrap on the hamburger.

"Yeah, but . . . wait a second! Mom!" I shouted. "What's in the pie?"

"The usual stuff, Charlie! Milk, sugar, eggs, nutmeg . . . oh, and cinnamon!"

"Yes! We're saved, Frank!" I knocked the hamburger out of his hands. I shoved a hot piece of pumpkin pie into his mouth. "Eat this!"

Frank gulped and swallowed.

I grabbed a piece and gobbled it down.

We ate nonstop until the pie disappeared.

"I'm stuffed," Frank groaned. Then he stared at me. "Charlie, did you hear what I said? I'm stuffed. I'm not hungry anymore!"

I nodded as I licked my fingers. My unhairy fingers! I felt my cheeks. No more hair. I stared at Frank's face. "Your hair is gone, too!" I told him. "We're cured. We're not beasts anymore!"

Footsteps pounded down the stairs, and my mom entered the kitchen. She stared at the clean plate and laughed. "Well, I see you found the pie!"

"Yeah, it was great, Mom!"

"Fantastic!" Frank agreed.

"I'll have to make another one soon. By the


way," she added. "You know that juice you left in the blender?"

"What about it?" I asked.

"It was delicious." Mom stared at the package of hamburger on the floor. Her eyes gleamed. She grabbed up the meat and raised it to her mouth.

"That juice was delicious," she said. "But, boy, am I hungry!"

ATTACK OF THE TATTOO



When I went through my Halloween bag this year, I was a little disappointed. No big chocolate bars, no large lollipops with gum inside, nothing exciting at all. Usually people in my neighborhood give really cool stuff.

I dumped the bag out onto my comforter the morning after Halloween. I kicked off my sneakers and climbed up onto my bed. I'm kind of short, so when I say climb, I really mean it! I twisted my hair into a knot and slipped a rubber band around the thick clump to get it out of my way.

My hair is probably my best feature. My dad is always calling me "Jeannie with the light brown hair." It's really heavy and long. In fact, I probably have the longest hair in the whole seventh grade.

I picked up the empty pillowcase I used as a loot bag and checked inside it, just to make sure I hadn't missed anything.

That's when I saw the tattoo.

Stuck in the corner of my bag, I found a slip of paper about three inches wide. It was covered with red swirls and it had something dark printed on it.

I turned the bag upside down and shook it. The little slip floated down like a feather.

It was a fake tattoo of a black snake — a very mean-looking snake. Its scales had a strange neon-green glint to them. The snake had a red mouth with sharp silver fangs, like two tiny daggers.

It was the coolest tattoo I'd ever seen.

I rushed into the bathroom to put it on. I pressed the tattoo to my arm and covered it with a wet washcloth. I waited a few minutes. Then I took the washcloth off. I couldn't wait to see myself with a big black snake tattoo!

But it didn't work. The tattoo was still on the paper. It wasn't even wet! The water rolled right off it.

I examined the tattoo. There were no directions or anything.

The design of the red swirls on the paper made me sort of dizzy. I stared at them, waiting to see what would happen. Soon, a message came into focus. It read: "To apply, use water scorched by the sun."

I sat down on the edge of the tub. My head was spinning.

What did the 3-D message mean? Did I have to buy some special kind of water?

I could think of only one thing to try. In the kitchen I took a bottle of spring water out of the fridge.

Out in the backyard I held it up into the sunlight. The sun hit the frosted bottle of water and lit it up like a flashlight.

I pressed the tattoo to my arm and poured the springwater over it. The water splashed on my T-shirt and jeans.

I really hope this works! I thought to myself.

When I took the piece of paper with the red swirls away, the snake tattoo was printed perfectly on my arm.

"Yes!" I shouted. I was so psyched! It really looked like a real tattoo.

I had to show someone! My parents were sleeping. So I decided to go over to my best friend Maggie's house.

I hopped on my bike and pedaled to Lake Street, where she lives. I took the shortcut through the park.

It was a bit chilly, but basically a nice day. Orange and red leaves crunched under the wheels of my bike. My eyes were focused on the bike path — when I felt a twinge on my arm. It hurt, as if someone had pinched me.

Then I felt something slither onto my lap.

Something long and heavy.

Moving slowly.

I screamed as the thing slid over my legs.

It felt like a snake!

My bike swerved.

Closing my eyes, I reached down and grabbed the long, scaly thing. It wriggled in my hand, thrashing around.

Opening my eyes, I threw the thing into the woods as hard as I could.

My heart was beating so fast I thought it would explode. I kept riding, trying to get as far away from the snake-thing as possible. I rode so fast I almost crashed my bike!

It couldn't really have been a snake, I told myself. Snakes that big don't live in the park. It must have been a tree branch or maybe a piece of rope or something.

Besides, I told myself, it's too cold for snakes. They like warm places.

I decided not to tell Maggie. I was sure it was my imagination.

I found Maggie sitting in the den, watching TV. Judging from the pile of wrappers on the floor next to her, she had already eaten a lot of her Halloween candy. She loves candy more than anyone I know.

She's very pretty, with long strawberry blond hair and blue eyes. Maggie has freckles covering her face. And at that moment, she had chocolate covering her face too!

Maggie was just as impressed with my tattoo as I thought she'd be. "Jeannie, that is the coolest thing I have ever seen!" she screamed.

"That's exactly what I thought!" I told her.

"I can't believe how scary your tattoo is. It totally gives me the creeps! The one I got is not nearly as scary," she said, laughing. She shut off the TV with the remote and pulled me down next to her on the couch.

"You mean you got one too?" I asked her.

"Yeah. It was in the bottom of my bag. But I couldn't figure out how to put it on," Maggie complained. She took out a piece of paper just like mine from the pocket of her jeans shirt. "It's not even a quarter as scary as yours."

Her tattoo was a green centipede with a hundred hairy legs.

"I don't know, Maggie," I said. "Your tattoo is pretty gross. I think it's just as creepy as mine."

"So how do I put it on, Jeannie?" Maggie demanded.

I almost gave her the secret, but then I decided not to.

"Nope!" I said with a smile.

"No way! What do you mean?" she demanded.

"You can figure it out for yourself. It's fun!" I told her. Maggie loves a good mystery. I didn't want to take it away from her.

"Really, Maggie, you'll have a great time figuring it out!" I said. I grabbed the remote from her

and switched the TV back on. We had a fun afternoon, watching TV and eating the rest of Maggie's Halloween candy.

That night, I was asleep when I felt the pinch again.

It woke me up. My heart pounded. It was the exact same kind of twinge I had felt earlier, on my bike. I lifted up the covers to my bed. I peeked at my arm. Perfectly normal.

Everything is okay, I told myself, trying to slow down my racing heart. Go back to sleep.

I settled into my soft white flannel sheets, trying to relax.

Then I felt it. Again.

Something was in the bed with me.

My breath caught in my throat. I was scared to move. I didn't even *want* to breathe.

Another pinch tweaked my arm. Then another, even *harder*.

Something slippery brushed the back of my foot.

I screamed and kicked. *A snake was in my bed!*

A black, diamond-shaped head poked out of the sheets. It slid next to my shoulder!

"Get away from me!" I shrieked. I scrambled away from it. The snake's red tongue flickered at me.

A second snake slipped over my leg. Another slid past my hand.

I jumped out of the tangled covers. I fell to the floor, caught up in the sheet.

Three hissing snakes were coiled on my bed!

The tangled sheet gave me an idea. I threw the sheet over the snakes. Then, with a deep breath, I gathered it up into a wriggling ball. The fangs of the snakes poked through the cloth.

I stumbled to the window. I yanked it open and tossed the whole bundle out into the backyard.

I watched the snakes crawl out of the sheet. They slithered off into the bushes. Now I knew for sure — the snakes were real!

And — somehow — they were coming from my tattoo!

I've got to get rid of this tattoo! I thought.

I ran to the bathroom, hoping that my parents wouldn't hear me up so late. I didn't want to explain what I was doing. I lathered my arm with soap and scrubbed it with a washcloth.

The tattoo didn't fade at all. I scrubbed harder. Nothing happened.

I tried the dandruff shampoo that my dad uses. It is supposed to be really strong. But it didn't do a thing. I even tried nail polish remover.

The skin on my arm turned red and puffy. It hurt and stung, but the tattoo looked as bright as ever.

I rested my head on the mirror. It was cold and smooth against my hot forehead.

"What am I going to do?" I moaned to myself in

the mirror. I had no more ideas to try. I didn't even know who would *believe* my crazy story.

My only hope was Maggie. Maggie would take me seriously. I could hardly wait for the morning to come. At school before first period, I scanned the yard for her.

"Have you guys seen Maggie?" I asked some boys from my class who were playing basketball.

"Nope!" Zach Baily shouted. He turned back to the game, but then he caught a glimpse of my tattoo. He dropped the basketball midshot.

"Jeannie! Wait up!" Zach yelled. "How did you get that tattoo to stick?" He raced over to me.

Zach ran his fingers through his spiky blond hair and pulled his glasses out of his back pocket. He grabbed my arm and examined the tattoo.

"It's the coolest tattoo I've ever seen!" he exclaimed.

"I know, I know," I mumbled.

"I can't believe this," he said, squeezing my arm. "I got three of these things in my Halloween bag. I've tried everything. But nothing I do will get them to stick. How did you do it?"

"I can't tell you," I stammered. "Believe me, you don't want to know!"

The bell rang, and I hurried off to class.

I finally caught up with Maggie at lunch.

"Jeannie," she cried. "What's up? You look sort of awful, no offense." I joined her on the lunch line, cutting in front of about ten people.

"I really need to talk to you," I whispered.

"The corner table?" she asked. I nodded yes.

Together we bought our drinks and took our lunch bags over to a small table in the corner of the cafeteria. It's the table we always sit at when there's something serious to talk about.

"It's my tattoo," I began. "I'm in big trouble. It's cursed or something."

"No way," she murmured, unwrapping her sandwich and taking a bite. "Okay, start at the beginning. Tell me how you got the thing on in the first place," she said. "I couldn't figure out how to get mine on."

I told her about the sun water and about the snake attacks. By the time I was done, she was already thinking hard about how to get rid of the tattoo. That's why I'm so glad she's my best friend. Anybody else wouldn't even have believed me.

"You tried to wash it off?" she asked me.

"I tried everything," I moaned. "I tried soap. I tried shampoo. I even tried nail polish remover. Nothing will take it off. Look!" I cried. I showed her the tattoo. "It looks even brighter than before!"

"Just give me a minute. I have to think." She gulped down her chocolate milk.

"I've got it!" she cried. "Have you tried checking the paper again? If it told you how to put the

tattoo on, maybe it has instructions for taking the tattoo off."

"Of course!" I exclaimed. "That's a great idea. And I kept the paper too. I still have it at home. Maggie, you're the best!"

Back at my house, the paper was right where I left it — tucked into the pocket of my jeans. It's a good thing my mom doesn't like to do the wash too often!

I flopped down on my bed. The paper crackled under my fingertips. I concentrated on the swirls. Around and around, my eyes went, following the tails of the swirls. Soon, letters zoomed forward through the swirls. I saw another message!

It read: "To remove, use water struck by the full moon."

I picked up the phone next to my bed and called Maggie.

"How did it go? Any luck?" she asked.

"Yes. You'll never guess what it said," I replied. I told her about the full moon water.

"No way!" Maggie cried.

"Do you know when the moon will be full next?" I asked.

"Yeah. Hold on a minute. We have this calendar in the kitchen. I think it tells you when the moon will be full."

I chewed on my nails while Maggie set down

the phone and checked the calendar. What if I had to keep the tattoo on for a whole month? The snakes would get me for sure!

Finally, Maggie came back to the phone. "Jeanie, you're not going to believe this," she cried. "The moon will be full tonight!"

I waited until I heard the sounds of my parents going to sleep. Then I crept downstairs. I took another one of my dad's spring waters from the fridge. The door slammed shut behind me. I stepped out into the backyard.

The light from the moon fell in waves as clouds slowly drifted through the sky. The grass, wet with dew, felt cold under my bare feet.

I held the bottle out in front of me to soak up the rays of the moon.

But at that very moment — *the sky went dark.*

I gazed up. An enormous cloud was fixed in the center of the sky. It hid the moon completely.

That's when I felt the pinch.

I gazed down at my arm and I saw it. A snake. A big black snake wriggling out of the tattoo!

First I saw its diamond-shaped head. Then the body slid out in a blur. The snake hit the ground and slithered a few feet away.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to run away! But how could I run away from my own arm?

I had to get the tattoo off! I searched the sky, praying for the moon to show itself.

To my horror, I felt another pinch on my arm. Another hissing snake fell to the ground. And then another.

Five snakes stared at me out of the darkness, their shining yellow eyes watching me. Waiting.

Where was the moon? The cloud was moving so slowly. . . .

Soon there were ten pairs of eyes staring me down. Then there were fifteen.

Then I lost count.

Snakes everywhere. Hissing. Coiling. Arching up to strike.

Trembling, I backed away from the snakes, to the far corner of the yard. I hoped I'd find moonlight. No luck! Only darkness.

I heard the slick sound of the snakes slithering through the wet grass. Following me. They closed in around me, forming a circle.

I clutched my bottle of springwater. My heart was beating so hard, I could barely breathe.

HISSSSSS. The snakes slithered even closer.

I cried out as the cloud passed. Moonlight flooded the yard! It filled my bottle with a clear, blue light.

Frantically I tried to unscrew the bottle. The tabs were hard to break. My sweaty hands kept slipping on the cap.

No! I couldn't get it open!

I felt a hard pinch on my arm. Harder than any of the other twinges.

I turned to see an enormous snake push out from the tattoo. Its head was as big as my fist. The giant snake's skin was shiny and black.

With a moan of horror, I dropped the water bottle!

It bounced away, into the long, cool grass.

The giant snake lifted its head and let out a loud hiss! The other snakes slid toward me.

I dived forward — and leaped over the ring of snakes. And grabbed for the bottle.

The bottle felt cold in my hand. I turned to face the giant snake.

It opened its mouth and spat a gob of hot venom at me.

I ripped the cap off the bottle.

"*Take this!*" I screamed. And I doused the giant snake with water.

My heart froze. Would the moon water work?

The snake hung there in midair, baring its fangs.

Then it fell to the ground with a *smack!*

A cloud of steam spiraled up from its body.

"It works!" I cried happily. But there was no time to celebrate.

The other snakes slithered forward to attack!

"Get away from me!" I screamed. Frantically, I splashed water on them.

They flipped and buckled. Their bodies dissolved into steam.

I glanced at my water bottle. Almost empty.

I poured the rest of the water into my hand. Then I scrubbed my arm until all the colors of the tattoo blended together. The muddy colors ran down my arm in a dirty river.

Yes! My arm — it was tattoo-free.

I stood all alone in the backyard. My nightgown was soaked with spring water and sweat.

"I will never put on another tattoo as long as I live!" I promised myself. "*Never!*"

I couldn't wait to tell Maggie the next day in school.

I opened the gate to the schoolyard — and my mouth fell open.

Almost everyone in the yard was wearing a tattoo!

"Jeannie!" Maggie cried, pushing through the crowd of kids to get to me. "It's so terrible! Zach Baily heard us talking and he told everyone. . . ."

That's when Zach himself stepped out of the crowd. He stood in front of us with his hands behind his back.

"Thanks, guys," he said, laughing. "If you hadn't explained how to get the tattoos on, I never would have figured it out! Here — a present for you!"

He slapped something wet and squishy onto

my arm. Before I could move, he did the same to Maggie.

A tattoo of a fat, hairy tarantula shone from Maggie's arm.

A sleek gray rat with glowing red eyes stared up at me from my arm.

"Maggie, is the moon still full tonight?" I whispered. "*Or do we have to wait a whole month?*"

THE WISH

"Eugene! Let me out of here!" I yelled.

Eugene didn't answer.

"Eugene!" I banged on the closet door. "I'm going to get you for this!" I banged some more. Then I kicked the door.

It was Halloween night. I was supposed to meet Alex, my best friend, to go trick-or-treating. I was supposed to meet him right now.

But Eugene, my stupid fifteen-year-old brother, had locked me in my bedroom closet.

And I couldn't get out.

And Mom and Dad were downstairs. They didn't hear me yelling. Or banging. Or kicking.

I didn't know where Eugene was.

He's probably in his room laughing at me, I thought. Or stealing my allowance. Those are two of his favorite things to do.

I groped around the closet floor for my sneakers. That's how I ended up in here. I was search-

ing for my high-tops — when Eugene sneaked up behind me and shoved me into the closet.

“Trick or treat, Max!” he howled with laughter. Then he slammed the door shut and locked me in.

I banged on the closet door again — this time as hard as I could.

“Mom! Dad! Euu-gene! Let me out of here!”

“Max. Where are you?” Mom called from the bottom of the stairs.

“Up here!” I shouted. “I’m locked in the closet.”

“Alex is down here in the living room waiting for you.” Mom came upstairs and unlocked the door. “How on earth did you lock yourself in the closet?”

“*Eugene* locked me in,” I grumbled.

Mom laughed.

Mom thinks Eugene is funny. Dad does too. So Eugene never gets into trouble.

I found my high-tops. They weren’t even in my closet. I had left them under the kitchen table.

I grabbed my trick-or-treat bag, slipped on my monster mask, and headed out the front door with Alex.

“Where were you?” Alex asked, tying on his vampire cape. “I almost left without you.”

“Eugene locked me in the closet,” I told him.

Alex shrugged. “Well, at least you still have your hair.”

My hair! I yanked off my mask and checked my hair.

Last Halloween, Eugene poured rubber cement inside the top of my mask. When I pulled off my mask, half my hair came out with it. The other half had glue stuck all over it.

I ran my fingers through my hair. No glue.

I tugged my mask back on.

This year I had an awesome mask. A long scar ran down one side, dripping with blood. Warts and boils covered the other side. Totally gross.

No one would recognize me in this mask. I was sure of it.

Alex slipped his vampire teeth into his mouth, and we rang my next-door neighbor's doorbell.

"Trick or treat!" we both called out when Ms. Greenway opened the door. Ms. Greenway is really nice. She owns the pet store in town.

"Hi, Alex. Great monster mask, Max!" Ms. Greenway exclaimed.

Ms. Greenway dumped handfuls of candy in our bags. Chocolate bars, candy corn, and my favorite Halloween treat — a huge jelly apple.

We thanked Ms. Greenway. Then we trick-or-treated through the whole neighborhood. By the time we reached the end of the street, our bags spilled over with candy.

"We got some great stuff this year!" I said,

peering into my bag. "Especially Ms. Greenway's jelly apple. I can't wait to eat it."

"Jelly apple!" Eugene stomped behind us. "Who has a jelly apple?"

"Uh — see ya, Max." Alex backed away from Eugene. He's afraid of him. "Have to get home now. Bye." He waved and took off down the block.

"Give me your jelly apple, Maxie," Eugene ordered.

"It's mine. You can't have it," I protested. "And don't call me Maxie."

"Give it to me — or I'll lock you in the closet again, Maxie!" Eugene grinned. Then he snatched my trick-or-treat bag and started stuffing my candy in his mouth.

"Stop it!" I yelled. "Give that back to me!" I grabbed for the bag and knocked it out of Eugene's hands. It fell to the ground, and the candy scattered all over the street.

"Now look what you did!" I picked up the bag and peered inside. It was empty.

I glared at Eugene. He was eating my jelly apple.

"Thanks, Maxie." He smirked. Then he walked away.

"Nothing!" I grumbled. "A whole night of trick-or-treating — and I have nothing left."

I glanced around. The street was deserted. All the trick-or-treaters had gone home. The houses

Alex and I had been to stood in darkness now. Their blinds were drawn, and the porch lights were turned off.

All the houses were dark. All, but one — where a candle flickered inside a grinning jack-o'-lantern. Flickered with a bright orange light.

I don't remember going to that house, I thought. Alex and I must have missed that one.

I ran up the porch steps and rang the bell. I'll just stop here, get some candy, and run home, I decided. I waited for someone to answer the door.

I waited and waited. I rang the doorbell again. I started to leave — when I heard the click of the lock.

The door swung open.

"Trick or treat!" I called out.

An old woman stood in the doorway — the oldest person I'd ever seen. A few thin strands of white hair clung to her head. Her cheekbones jutted way out. Her wrinkled skin clung tightly to her bones.

She looks like a skeleton, I realized. A living skeleton.

"What do you want?" she snapped. She stared at me with eyes set deep into her skull.

"Uh. Trick or treat?" I choked out.

I held out my bag — and she grabbed my wrist.

"Hey!" I pulled back.

The old woman tightened her grip.

"Stop! Let me go!" I yelled.

"Don't you want your treat?" she demanded in a raspy voice. She dug her bony fingers deep into my skin.

"No!" I screamed. "Let me go!" I yanked my arm hard, but the old woman yanked it back — and pulled me close to her.

"What do you want?" I cried. "LET ME GO!"

She lowered her face to mine. "You . . . are . . . not . . . going . . . anywhere," she declared.

"I have to go home," I yelled, struggling to pull away.

"Not until I give you your treat," she rasped.

"I don't want my treat!" I screamed.

I twisted in the old woman's grasp. But she refused to let go.

"Here — take this." She shoved a jagged rock into my hand. Its sharp edges cut into my skin.

I let out a loud cry.

She let me go.

I flew down the steps and started to pitch the rock into her garden.

"Don't do that!" she shrieked. "Don't throw away the power!" Then she let out a loud, evil laugh that cut through the night.

I turned and ran. I ran as fast as my legs could carry me. My sides ached, but I didn't stop running until I reached home.

I raced up the stairs to my bedroom. I could

still hear the old woman's horrible laugh echoing in my head. My heart pounded in terror.

I collapsed on my bed and stared at the rock.

"I'm going to get you for this, Eugene," I muttered angrily. "This was all your fault."

I thought about last Halloween — when I had half my hair pulled out. All because of Eugene.

"I wish you weren't my brother," I said as I opened the bedroom window. "I wish I were an only child."

I tossed the rock outside — and went to sleep.

"Oh, no!" I practically leaped out of bed the next morning. It was eight-thirty. I had to be in school in fifteen minutes!

I threw on a rumpled blue sweatshirt and jeans. Then I raced downstairs to the kitchen for my backpack.

I didn't see it anywhere.

Where did I put it? I wondered. I couldn't ask Mom — she had already left for work. So had Dad.

Eugene was gone too — but that didn't matter. Even if he knew where my backpack was, he wouldn't tell me.

I checked my watch. Only five minutes left before the bell rang.

I dashed out of the house.

I ran the five blocks to school — and stopped in front of the building.

Except it wasn't the school building.

It was an apartment house.

"Oh, no," I moaned. How could I do this? How could I forget the way to school!

I glanced up at the street sign — and gasped.

I was standing on Dwyer and Fifth streets.

Dwyer and Fifth — exactly where the school should be.

But the school wasn't there.

I whirled around. All the other stores and houses were the same. Everything the same. Except — no school.

What's going on? I wondered. My school has to be here. It *has* to be.

I stood in front of the apartment house.

Staring at it.

Waiting for it to turn back into my school. But, of course, it didn't.

I glanced up and down the block, hoping to spot one of the kids from my class. No one around.

Maybe my school isn't on Dwyer and Fifth.

But where is it? How come I can't remember where my school is?

I'm always losing things — like my sneakers and my backpack. But now I've done it big time, I thought. I've lost my whole school.

I have to go home, I told myself. And look up the school's address.

I ran all the way back. Then I raced up to my bedroom to search for my backpack. My social

studies book was in there. And it had the school's address stamped in the front.

I searched under the bed, in the closet — everywhere. No backpack.

I bet Eugene hid it! I thought. I bet it's in his room.

I charged into Eugene's room — and froze.

Eugene's room wasn't Eugene's room!

His bed, his dresser, everything — gone. The room was a study now, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lining the walls. A brown leather couch took the place of Eugene's bed.

What was going on?

I started to feel dizzy.

I sat down on the floor and tried to think.

There's a good explanation for all of this, I told myself. But what? Nothing made any sense.

I have to find Alex. He'll help me figure this out, I decided. But where was Alex? I couldn't look for him in school, because I didn't know where the school was.

I raced out of the house and ran all the way to Alex's house. His mother would tell me where to find the school.

I rang the doorbell.

His mother opened the door.

"Hi," I said. "I have to ask you a weird question."

Alex's mother stared at me for a moment. She studied my face carefully. Then she screamed.

"Wh-what's the matter?" I stammered.

"Go away!" she shrieked.

"I-I just need to know —"

"Get out of here!" she cut me off. "Go!" Then she slammed the door in my face.

My head started to pound. I began to feel dizzy again.

What was going on today? I couldn't find my school. Eugene's bedroom had disappeared. And now Alex's mother was acting crazy.

I walked through the neighborhood in a daze.

My legs trembled, but I kept walking. I passed the post office, the haircutter, and the library.

The library.

If the school really is gone, maybe someone from my class is in there, I thought.

I went inside.

I glanced around the room. No kids anywhere.

The librarian sat behind her desk, reading a catalogue. "Um, excuse me," I began. "Could you tell me — where is the Dwyer Park Middle School?"

The librarian glanced up. Her eyes met mine. Then they flew wide open — so wide, they practically bulged out of her head.

"Aiiiii!" She let out the loudest and longest shriek I ever heard.

I jumped back.

"Get out!" she cried, leaping from her chair.

"Why?" I shouted. "I haven't done anything wrong. I paid for my overdue books last week!"

“Go away!” she yelled, shrinking back.

“What’s wrong?” I shouted above her cries.

“Please — tell me what’s wrong?”

She didn’t reply. She just kept screaming.

She was still screaming when I ran out the door.

I broke out in a cold sweat. My clammy T-shirt clung to me as I charged down the street.

Why did the librarian scream when she saw me? Why did Alex’s mother scream? Why was *everyone* acting so crazy?

I stopped running when I reached the grocery store. There is a phone in there, I remembered. I’ll call Mom at work.

I slowly opened the door to the grocery store. I peeked inside. A clerk with a bushy white mustache stood behind the counter, checking out a man’s groceries.

I made my way quietly to the phone at the back of the store. I didn’t want them to see me. I was afraid they would scream too.

I checked my pocket for change. But all I came up with was a dollar bill.

I am going to have to ask for change, I realized with dread.

I held my breath and headed for the counter.

The clerk studied a box of cereal, searching for the price.

The shopper flipped through the pages of a magazine.

Neither one had spotted me yet.

I took a final step. "Excuse me —"

The clerk peered up from the box of cereal. The shopper glanced over at me.

A smile slowly spread across the clerk's lips — and I let out a huge sigh of relief.

Then, from under the counter, he pulled out a baseball bat and yelled, "GET HIM!"

I whirled around and bolted down the aisle.

"Don't let him get away!" the clerk yelled to the shopper.

The two men charged after me. Their pounding feet shook the floor.

I yanked the door hard. It opened with a crash. I ran down the street as fast as I could.

"There he is!" I heard the grocer shout.

"I see him!" another voice called out.

I shot a glance behind me.

Oh, no! It was the barber. He was chasing me too.

I pumped my legs hard.

"We're losing him!" someone cried. I quickly turned around. It was Alex's mother! And Alex's father was there too. And the librarian. And a crowd of others. People I didn't even recognize.

They were all chasing me. Yelling and chasing me.

"He's slowing down!" a tall, thin man pointed at me angrily. "We can get him now!"

I turned a corner, gasping for air.

“Catch him! Don’t let him get away!” the angry voices cried out.

I ran through town. The shops passed in a blur. I rounded another corner — and there stood the pet shop! Ms. Greenway’s pet store.

Ms. Greenway will help me! I decided. She likes me. She’ll tell me what’s going on. And she’ll protect me!

I ducked inside the pet store and slammed the door behind me.

I tried to catch my breath. My eyes darted left and right. The store was empty.

“Be right there!” Ms. Greenway called from the back.

“Ms. Greenway! Hurry!” I cried. “You have to help me!”

Ms. Greenway rushed to the front of the store.

“They’re chasing me!” I cried. “The whole town is after me!”

My eyes darted to the front window. The crowd was closing in.

“Hurry, Ms. Greenway!” I begged. “Lock the door!”

“Calm down,” Ms. Greenway said softly. She glanced out the window. The angry pack stood right outside, with the grocer at the front. He swung the bat wildly in the air.

I searched the crowd for someone who knew me. My parents. My brother. Alex. And realized that there wasn’t a single kid out there.

No kids in the street.

No kids in the library.

No kids anywhere.

The people in the crowd glared at me through the store window.

"Lock the door! Hurry, Ms. Greenway!" I shouted again.

"I'll take care of everything," Ms. Greenway said soothingly. "Now just sit down and catch your breath."

I sat on a step stool next to the goldfish tanks and dropped my head in my hands.

"NOW!" Ms. Greenway shouted.

The grocer charged into the store. He and Ms. Greenway threw a big, heavy net over me.

"Let me out of here!" I cried, clawing at the net. "Let me go!"

The crowd outside pressed their faces against the window and cheered.

"Let me go!" I cried again. "Why are you doing this?"

The people outside banged on the window with their fists. Shouting and cheering and clapping.

I stared into the crowd. Into their menacing eyes. And there, standing right in front, I saw the scary old woman. With one hand she wagged a gnarled finger at me. With the other she held up a gray rock.

The gray rock she gave me yesterday.

Don't throw away the power! Her words came back to me.

And then I knew what had happened.

The rock *did* have power. It made my wish come true.

The clerk and Ms. Greenway lifted me in the net.

They threw me into a cage.


A permanent display for everyone to visit — with a plaque in front that read ENDANGERED SPECIES.

Yes, my wish had come true.

I had wished to be an only child.

And I *was* an only child — the only child on earth.

AN OLD STORY



"Rats!" I slammed the kitchen cupboard doors. "Dad forgot to go to the store again!"

My ten-year-old brother, Jon, strolled into the kitchen, chomping on the last of the Oreos.

"Give me that!" I yelled, snatching the half-eaten cookie out of his hand. "Eeew — it's all slobbery!" I stuffed it in my mouth, anyway. That's how hungry I was.

Jon leaned against the fridge. "Dad said he'd go to the market today."

"That's what he said yesterday," I replied. "And the day before."

My father has his own store, Sperling Opticals, where he sells eyeglasses. It was inventory time, and he worked late every night.

My mother just got a new job as the mayor's campaign manager. She never came home before midnight.

The doorbell rang. "Hey, Tom. Maybe it's Becca," Jon teased.

"Shut up." Becca was a new girl in school. She had long, shiny brown hair that she tucked under a Baltimore Orioles cap. I love the Orioles — and I thought Becca was cute too.

I peered through the window by the door. A tall old lady stood on our front steps. She wore a floppy black hat with a big rose pinned to the brim, and a blue coat. She carried a big black purse and a suitcase.

"Who is it?" Jonathan asked.

"I don't know."

The old lady rang the doorbell again.

I unlocked the door. "Wait," Jonathan warned me. "She's a stranger!"

"She's just an old lady," I said to Jonathan. "What can she do to us?"

When I opened the door, the lady's face lit up. "Ding dong! Hello!" she exclaimed. "You must be Tom."

She stepped inside and smothered me in a big, perfumy hug. "I haven't seen you since you were knee-high. And now you must be at least thirteen!"

"Actually, I'm twelve," I mumbled, staring at her. Did I know her?

"And baby Jonathan." She pinched his cheek. "What a big boy you are!"

Jon rolled his eyes at me. I shrugged. Whoever she was, this old lady definitely knew us.

"You boys don't remember me, do you?" she

asked. We shook our heads. "Of course you don't. I'm your aunt Dahlia!"

"Oh — Aunt Dahlia!" I said. "Well, Mom and Dad aren't home yet. . . ."

"Didn't they tell you I was coming?" Aunt Dahlia asked.

"No," I said. "I guess they forgot. They've been forgetting a lot of things lately."

"They're busy people," Aunt Dahlia declared. "But we'll do fine without them, won't we, boys?"

We followed her as she marched into the kitchen and set her suitcase on the floor. "Are you hungry? What if I whip up a batch of cookies?"

"Excellent," I said. "We're starving."

Aunt Dahlia took over the kitchen. Jonathan and I huddled in the den. "Is she staying with us?" Jonathan whispered.

I flicked on the TV. "I guess. I wish Mom and Dad had warned us."

A little while later Aunt Dahlia appeared with a plate of cookies. "Get 'em while they're hot!"

I took a cookie. It had a big brown wrinkly thing in the middle of it that looked like a giant raisin. I nibbled around it.

"Now, now, Tommy," Aunt Dahlia scolded. "Don't skip the prune. That's the best part."

Prunes! I stole a glance at Jon. His nose wrinkled in disgust.

"Come on," she coaxed. "It's good for you."

I forced myself to eat the prune. It wasn't that bad.

Aunt Dahlia offered me the plate. "Have another?"

Now that Aunt Dahlia was around to watch us, Mom and Dad worked later than ever. Aunt Dahlia did all the cooking. She made us eat prunes every day. I didn't like them, but I didn't have much choice. It was prunes or nothing.

"She's nice and everything," Jon said one day, "But what is she doing here?"

I didn't know. But we were about to find out.

I felt strange when I woke up Saturday morning. A little achy. My legs felt stiff when I got out of bed. I went to the kitchen for some cereal.

Mom and Dad had already left for work. Jon trudged into the kitchen, all hunched over. "Oh, my aching back," he moaned.

I stared at him. His pants were hiked up high on his waist. His stomach was sticking out — like he had a little potbelly. But Jon had always been really skinny.

He waddled over to the fridge. That's when I noticed it. On top of his head, right in the middle of his normally thick, curly black hair — was a big bald spot!

"Jon, what happened to your hair?" I asked.

He cupped his ear. "What did you say? I can't hear you too well."

"What happened to your hair?" I repeated.

Jon reached up to pat the top of his head. "My hair? What do you mean? What's wrong with it?"

"You have a big bald —"

I stopped because now he was staring at me in a weird way.

"Tom," he began. "When did your forehead get so big?"

My hand flew to my forehead. Normally there was hair there — curly black hair just like Jon's. But all I felt was smooth bare skin.

I raced to the bathroom mirror. When I saw myself, I gasped.

I was going bald! And was that — gray hair?

It was! Two patches of gray hair on my temples. "What's going on?" I cried. I tugged at my hair. A clump came off in my hand. I stared at it. I couldn't believe this was happening.

"Maybe we got some bad shampoo!" Jon's voice shook.

"I'm calling Mom and Dad," I said. "Maybe we're sick. We need to see a doctor!"

Aunt Dahlia suddenly appeared in the mirror behind me. "My, don't you look handsome," she cooed.

"Handsome!" I screamed. "I'm going bald!"

I tried to push past her. I had to call Mom and Dad. But she blocked my way, gripping my shoulder. She was pretty strong for an old lady.

"Don't bother your parents," she warned. "There's nothing to worry about."

"But —"

The doorbell rang. "I'll get it!" Aunt Dahlia chirped. She scurried off to answer the door.

In a few minutes, the house was filled with old ladies — Aunt Dahlia's friends. "They've come for a game of bridge," Aunt Dahlia explained. "And we're going to teach you boys how to play."

"I can't, Aunt Dahlia," I protested. "I've got football practice this afternoon."

Aunt Dahlia's expression darkened. "You're not going anywhere, young man." She turned to Jon and added, "Neither are you. Take this tea tray into the living room — now. March!"

She shoved us through the kitchen door. "Why is Aunt Dahlia so mean all of a sudden?" Jon whispered. "Our hair is falling out, and she doesn't even care!"

My stomach lurched. Something weird was going on.

Aunt Dahlia's friends squealed when Jon and I appeared. One tiny woman with silvery curls took the tea tray from me and pulled me beside her on the couch. "My name is Lilian. Aren't you sweet! You're graying nicely!"

I flashed a glance at Jon. She said *graying*. *You're graying nicely*.

Lilian giggled. "I mean, growing, of course."

A plump woman in a flowered dress sat beside Jon. "I'm Mimi," she said. "I have a very nice retirement fund. Enough for *two* to live on."

"Good for you," Jon said.

A tall woman said, "Don't hog the boys, ladies. Give us all a chance to meet them."

"Just wait your turn, Martha." Lilian clasped my hand and smiled at me.

Aunt Dahlia brought in a plate of sandwiches. "How is everyone getting along?"

"Splendidly," Mimi replied, giving Jon's hand a squeeze.

"Boys — I'm out of milk," Aunt Dahlia said. "Would one of you please run to the store for me?"

"I will!" Jon and I both jumped up at the same time.

"I said it first!" I cried. I raced out of the house. Then I remembered my bald head. What if I ran into someone from school? I sneaked back inside and grabbed a baseball cap to cover it.

Those old ladies are sure acting weird, I thought as I hurried down the street. It's almost as if they're —

I stopped with a shudder. The thought I had just then was too weird. But I couldn't shake it.

Those old ladies are flirting with me, I realized. Yuck!

Maybe I should run for it, I thought. But I remembered Jon, helpless with all those old ladies.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't leave him alone like that.

The bell on the door tinkled as I entered the store. I grabbed a quart of milk and set it on the counter.

"We have a special on antacids, if you're interested," the cashier said. "Senior citizens' discount."

I stared at her. Senior citizens'?

"No thanks," I muttered. I paid for the milk and left. Outside, I glanced at myself in the store window.

"My face!" I screamed. It was covered with wrinkles!

Maybe the glass in the window was warped, I thought. Maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me. I squinted and stared harder.

I looked horrible. My skin was all wrinkled up. My hair was gray. My head was practically bald. My eyes were yellow and bloodshot.

I was turning into an old man!

I began to shake. This can't be happening, I thought. I'm only twelve. I shouldn't be old for another sixty years.

I hurried home. Aunt Dahlia did this to me, I realized. I've got to find a way to stop it!

Jon was hunched on the sofa, smothered by the old ladies. I barely recognized him. His hair had turned completely white. His face was wrinkled up like — like a prune.

I grabbed him by the arm and dragged him into the hall.

"Where are you going, boys?" Aunt Dahlia called.

"Um . . . it's a guy thing," I bluffed. We escaped into our room.

"We're turning into old men!" Jon wailed. "It's like someone cast a spell on us!"

"Not just anyone," I added. "Our own aunt! Come on — let's check out her room. We've got to figure out what she's up to."

"Anything to get away from Mimi," Jon grumbled.

We tiptoed across the hallway to the guest room. I carefully shut the door behind us.

"You check her purse," I whispered. "I'll search her suitcase."

I clawed through the suitcase. I found nothing but blouses, sweaters, scarves, and dresses. Then I checked the dresser. I pulled open the top drawer.

And lifted up a small glass jar.

"Did you find anything?" Jon asked.

"Shhh!" I thought I heard a noise in the hallway. "Someone's coming! Hide!"

We dived under the bed. The bedroom door opened. I could see Aunt Dahlia's feet as she crossed the room to the dresser.

Oh, no — the dresser! Did I shut the top drawer? I couldn't remember.

Aunt Dahlia stood in front of the dresser for a minute. I held my breath.

"Dahlia?" It was Mimi. "Where are the boys?"

"Quiet!" Aunt Dahlia scolded. "Shut the door."

Mimi stepped into the room and closed the door. "They didn't escape, did they? They were getting so nice and old. Those prunes worked wonders."

"They must be in their room," Aunt Dahlia whispered. "Don't worry. They won't get away."

"That little one is cute," Mimi said. "I'll take him. Lilian says she wants to marry Tom."

Marry me! I squeezed Jon's arm to keep from yelling. He turned his eyes toward me, horrified.

Aunt Dahlia was turning us into old men — so those old ladies could marry us!

"We'll get houses next door to each other when we all move to Florida," Mimi went on. "That way the boys can be together."

"First you have to pay my fee," Aunt Dahlia insisted. "Then we'll talk."

Jon and I held our breaths as their shoes clomped past us and out of the room.

We crawled out from under the bed. "Did you hear that?" I whispered. "Aunt Dahlia is selling us to those old ladies! She turned us into old men so they could marry us and move to Florida!"

Jon pointed to the small glass jar I still held in my hand. "What's that?" he demanded.

I squinted at the label. Most of the writing was

too small to read. Then I saw the words ANTI-AGING WRINKLE CREAM. "Maybe it will help our wrinkles!" I whispered.

Jon grabbed the jar and opened it. He rubbed some cream on his face. Like magic, his wrinkles instantly began to disappear.

"That must be the antidote!" I cried. "We found it. We can turn ourselves young again!"

Aunt Dahlia burst back into the room. "There you are!" she shouted, reaching for the jar. "Give me that!"

"No way!" Jon clutched the jar and darted into the bathroom. I dashed in behind him and locked the door.

Aunt Dahlia pounded on the door. "Open up! Give me that wrinkle cream — or you'll be sorry!"

I snatched the cream from Jon and smeared it all over my face. Then I checked myself out in the mirror. Quickly, my wrinkles disappeared. My hair turned black again and started to grow back. It worked!

"Come out before I break that door down!" Aunt Dahlia growled. "Come on, ladies. One, two, three, *heave!*" I could hear them all throw their weight against the door. The lock began to give.

"Stupid cheap locks," I muttered.

"What are we going to do?" Jon asked. "If she gets to us, she'll force-feed us those weird prunes until we're old again!"

Bang, bang, bang! The door crashed open. Jon and I cowered behind the shower curtain.

"Get the cream!" Aunt Dahlia yelled. "Stand by with emergency prune juice!"

She clawed at the jar of cream in my hands. The other ladies grabbed Jon.

"No!" I cried. Clutching the wrinkle cream, I wrenched myself away and escaped to the kitchen.

Aunt Dahlia chased me. I backed up against the refrigerator. The door was open. I could feel the cold air on my legs.

"You can't get away, now," Aunt Dahlia cackled.

She closed in on me. . . .

"Get away!" I yelled. I reached into the fridge for something to throw at her. Anything.

My hand wrapped around the handle of a pitcher. In one swift movement, I grabbed the pitcher and tossed the liquid in her face.

"Aaaauugh!" Aunt Dahlia screamed. Brown liquid dripped from her face. "No! Not the prune juice!"

I gaped in shock as her skin wrinkled up like paper. Her teeth and her hair fell out. Her face puckered like a rotten apple.

"Wrinkle cream!" she moaned. "Get me the wrinkle cream!"

But it was too late. In seconds, she shriveled up to nothing and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"What have you done with Aunt Dahlia?" Mom asked when she and Dad came home that night.

"She was evil!" Jon cried.

"She tried to turn us into old men," I explained.

"Okay, boys," Dad chuckled. "Joke's over. Now tell us where your mother's aunt is."

"*My* aunt!" Mom cried. "I thought she was *your* aunt!"

"All the nuts are on *your* side of the family, Kate," Dad insisted.

"Maybe so, but she's *not* my aunt."

They stared at each other in shock. Mom clutched at her heart. Then she threw her arms around us and hugged us so hard, we practically choked to death. "We left our sons with a total stranger! We must be the worst parents in the world!"

"You're not so bad," I assured her. "Just don't let it happen again."

"Yeah," Jon added. "You owe us big time."

I checked myself carefully in the mirror before school on Monday. All my hair had grown back. I thought I saw a touch of gray in it still. But that could have been my imagination.

I sat alone at lunch that day. As I ate my ham sandwich, I spotted Becca, the girl with the Orioles cap. She crossed the room. She was coming toward me! My heart pounded.

She stopped at my table. "Mind if I sit with you?"

"N-no," I stammered. I couldn't believe it. She actually wanted to sit with me!

I stared at my sandwich for a minute. When I glanced up, she smiled shyly at me.

I didn't know what to say, so I took a bite of my sandwich. She unpacked her lunch: a prune sandwich on rye. Three prune cookies. A container of prune juice!

My jaw dropped. Becca saw me staring.

"My aunt Susan came to visit," she explained. "She packed my lunch." She paused and added, "I don't get it. She's really into prunes."

I handed her half of my ham sandwich. "Eat this," I told her. "And run for your life!"

THE SCARECROW



"Who would put a hundred-dollar scarf on a scarecrow?" Darleen Norris exclaimed. She brushed her blond hair away from her big blue eyes. "That's crazy."

Scott Grant shook his head. "Really crazy," he said. He took off his glasses and wiped them on his T-shirt. Then he put them back on. "I don't see how a scarf can cost a hundred dollars!"

"It's cashmere," Melanie Lin said. She kept her dark eyes on the scarecrow's neck. "It's the softest wool in the world."

Darleen, Scott, and Melanie all lived on Maple Street. They'd been walking to school together since kindergarten. Now they were in seventh grade.

This morning, they were running late. But they had to check out a scarecrow that had appeared out of nowhere!

The straw man stood in the front yard of the

house next to Darleen's. The old Swofford place. Mr. Swofford died four years before. Nobody had lived in his house since. The paint was peeling off. Loose shutters banged in the wind. The yard was a mess of weeds.

But now, in the middle of the weeds, stood a scarecrow. It stared back at them with sad eyes painted on a straw-filled pillow. The red mouth was turned down in a sad, ugly sneer.

On his head he wore a tomato-red baseball cap. He had on a black-and-white-plaid flannel shirt, black jeans, and white basketball sneakers. He wore a black jacket with its arms sticking straight out. At the end of the arms was a pair of blue gloves. And wrapped around his spindly straw neck was the yellow scarf.

"It's the same scarf," Melanie was saying. "I'm positive." She turned to Darleen. "You saw it too. Remember? When you went to the mall with me to get my new contacts?"

Darleen nodded. "It looks the same, but . . ."

"But nothing," Melanie interrupted. "It's definitely the same. I about passed out when I saw the price tag."

"But why would anybody put a hundred-dollar scarf on a scarecrow?" Darleen asked again. "It's too strange."

"Know what else is strange?" Scott asked. "That baseball cap. It's exactly like my cousin Eddie's. All red. No team emblem."

"What's so strange about that?" Darleen asked.

"It's strange," Scott said, "because I've been looking all over for a baseball cap just like it."

The three stared at the scarecrow in silence for a moment.

"The clothes are great," Darleen said at last. "But something about this scarecrow is creepy."

"Yeah. Definitely," Melanie agreed.

"I mean, what's a scarecrow doing on Maple Street?" Darleen asked.

"Halloween is only two days away," Melanie offered. "Some kids must have put him here for Halloween."

Darleen sighed. "Halloween is so boring. It's so boring and childish. I'm not even going to have a costume this year."

"That's what you keep saying," Scott replied. "You just keep talking about how boring Halloween is. You're going to totally spoil it for Melanie and me."

"We'd better go," Melanie said. "Mr. Kostin said he'd keep us after school if we were late again."

"Wait!" Darleen cried. She gasped. "His gloves!"

"What?" Melanie asked. "What about them?"

"They're . . . the ones in the window of Leather World!" Darleen exclaimed. Her heart began to beat rapidly. "I've been dying to get those gloves. Remember? I told you about them?"

Darleen studied the gloves carefully. Same shade of bright blue. Same soft leather. Same silver snaps on the cuffs. They were exactly like the ones at Leather World. Exactly!

"This is strange," Melanie said. "He's wearing stuff all three of us want."

"It's weird," Darleen agreed. She wondered if Melanie felt like taking the scarecrow's scarf. Or if Scott was thinking of grabbing the baseball cap.

She was definitely thinking about taking the gloves. She'd never stolen anything in her life. But stealing from a scarecrow...that wasn't really stealing, was it? She felt a strong urge to slip her hands inside that soft, blue leather.

"Yikes!" Melanie cried suddenly. "It's almost eight-thirty!"

"Oh no!" Darleen moaned. "If we're late again, Mr. Kostin is going to kill us!"

"Come on!" Scott cried. They ran the whole way to school.

"Psst! Scott!" Darleen whispered that afternoon.

"No talking, Darleen," Mr. Kostin cut in.

"Sorry," Darleen murmured. She glanced over at the next desk where Scott sat. She mouthed the words *Where's Melanie?*

Scott shrugged.

Weird, thought Darleen. Really weird.

They had been late that morning. Mr. Kostin gave them detention. He told the three of them to come to his classroom for an hour after school. But only Scott and Darleen showed up. Mr. Kostin handed them answer sheets, and they began checking math papers for him.

Darleen graded paper after paper. But the whole time, her mind whirled with questions: Where had the scarecrow come from? Why was he wearing things that she and Melanie and Scott wanted? Where was Melanie, anyway?

Darleen didn't have a clue.

The hour finally ended. Darleen ran to her locker. Then she met Scott in the usual place, on the front steps of the school.

"I can't believe Melanie skipped out on detention!" Darleen said. The two of them fell into step walking home.

Scott shook his head. "I hope she has a good excuse," he said. "If she doesn't, Mr. Kostin will keep her after school for a month."

They crossed over to Maple Street. The old Swofford place was only two houses away now. Darleen's heart began to beat fast again. She hoped the scarecrow was still there.

He was.

He stood in the weedy yard exactly as he had that morning. And yet... Darleen thought he looked different somehow.

Darleen admired his gloves again. They were so awesome.

“Hey!” Scott said suddenly. “His yellow scarf! It’s gone.”

Of course. Darleen didn’t see how she could have missed it. “Melanie will be sorry to hear this,” she said.

Scott shook his head. “How could somebody rip off his scarf?” he said. “And leave that cool baseball cap?”

“Or his gloves,” Darleen added. Now she felt the urge again. The urge to take the gloves.

But she felt a sudden chill. She knew she had to get away. She turned to Scott. “Listen, I have to go,” she said. “I have a ton of homework. . . .”

“Hey, Darleen!” came Melanie’s voice. “Scott!”

Darleen turned. Melanie was running across the street toward them. Darleen’s blue eyes widened when she saw that Melanie was wearing a bright yellow scarf.

“Mel?” Darleen said as she reached them. “*You* took the scarf?”

“I did!” Melanie giggled and twirled like a fashion model. “I love it!” she added. “It’s so soft. I haven’t taken it off since I got it. Even inside the house. I’m sleeping in it tonight!”

“Is that why you cut detention?” Scott asked.

Melanie bit her lip. “I know Mr. Kostin is going to murder me, but I couldn’t help it. I thought

about the scarf all day in school." She turned to Darleen. "Did you think about the gloves?"

"Yes," Darleen admitted. "All day."

"I couldn't stop thinking about the baseball cap," Scott said.

Melanie glanced from Scott to Darleen. "It's not like it's stealing or anything," she said. Her voice suddenly sounded hoarse.

"Ow. Sore throat," she croaked. She put a hand on the scarf and cleared her throat. Then she added, "I mean, putting clothes on a scarecrow! That's practically an invitation for somebody to take them."

"Really," Darleen agreed.

"So?" Melanie cleared her throat once more. "Get the gloves, Darleen."

"I don't know . . ." Darleen stared at the pillow face. At the sad eyes. The red mouth painted in such a sad, ugly sneer. She shuddered.

Melanie turned to Scott. "Why don't you take the baseball cap?" she asked him.

"Now?" Scott nervously pushed his glasses up on his nose.

"Now," Melanie said. "Go on. You want it. Take it."

"It's . . . it's getting so dark," Scott said. "I have to get home." With that, he ran across the street.

"I have to go too," Darleen said quickly. "The

scarf looks perfect on you, Mel." She waved. "See you tomorrow!"

Late that night, Darleen lay in bed. She couldn't fall asleep. Outside, the wind howled. The moon cast shadows of swaying tree limbs across her ceiling. She kept picturing kids in the yard next door. Kids stealing the scarecrow's beautiful blue gloves.

Darleen heard a banging noise outside. Somebody *was* after the gloves! Tossing back her quilt, Darleen sprinted to the window. She peered out. She couldn't see any kids. But maybe they were over by the house, where she couldn't see them.

Darleen dashed across her room, grabbing her robe on the way. She struggled into it as she ran down the stairs and out the front door. She raced barefoot down the porch steps, hardly feeling the cold. Wind whipped the trees above her head. Shutters banged against the old, abandoned house. She ran to the rickety picket fence that separated her yard from Mr. Swofford's.

The scarecrow was alone in the yard. All alone.

Darleen put a hand to her chest. Her heart was beating hard. She'd never wanted anything as much as she wanted those gloves.

Darleen looked around. The street was deserted. The houses were dark. Now was her chance! All she had to do was run over to the

scarecrow. Slip the gloves off his outstretched arms. Put them on her own hands. Then they would be . . .

"Darleen!"

Startled, Darleen turned. On the porch stood her mother.

"What in the world are you doing out here?" Her mother walked over to Darleen and led her inside. "And on a school night too," she scolded as Darleen climbed the stairs to her room. "Don't blame me if you have trouble getting up tomorrow."

Darleen hardly slept that night. At dawn, she jumped out of bed. She ran to the window again. Peering down, she saw that the scarecrow still had on his gloves. She breathed a sigh of relief.

As Darleen dressed for school, the phone rang.

"Darleen?" said a raspy voice. "It's me, Melanie. I've got the worst sore throat. I'm not going to school. Will you get my assignments?"

"Sure," said Darleen.

"Darleen?" Melanie croaked. "Did you get the gloves?"

"Not yet," Darleen said. "But . . . I will."

After breakfast, Darleen met Scott in front of her house. She told him about Melanie's sore throat.

"Too bad," Scott said. But he didn't seem very worried. He licked his lips nervously. He fiddled with his glasses. "I . . . I'm getting the baseball cap," he blurted out.

"Now?" Darleen exclaimed. "But we can't be late again!"

"We won't be," Scott said. He dashed into Mr. Swofford's yard. He ran up to the scarecrow and, with a leap, grabbed the cap off its head. He zoomed out of the yard.

"There!" He grinned as he put the cap on his head. He ran his hands along the red wool of the baseball cap. "It's a perfect fit!"

Darleen thought maybe she should follow Scott's example. Maybe she should run into the yard. Grab the gloves.

"Go on," Scott coaxed her. "Get the gloves."

Yes, Darleen thought. She drew a breath. She glanced up at the scarecrow. Then she held back. Those sad eyes! That evil sneer! Something made her shrink back.

"Not now," she said. "I'll get them after school."

Darleen thought about the gloves the whole day. Even when her homeroom made plans for a Halloween party, all she thought about were those blue leather gloves.

The school day ended at last. Darleen waited for Scott at the usual place on the front steps. She

waited for twenty minutes. But Scott didn't show up. She was getting up to leave when she saw him walk out the door. He was wearing the red baseball cap.

"Scott!" Darleen called. "Where have you been?"

Scott stared at her, confused. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why didn't you meet me?" Darleen asked.

"Oh," he said. "Was I supposed to meet you?"

Darleen rolled her eyes. "You meet me here every day, Scott! Me and Melanie. What's wrong with you?"

Scott frowned. "I don't think anything's wrong," he said slowly. "I . . . I can't remember anything wrong. Is there?"

"Stop it, Scott!" Darleen snapped.

"Stop what?"

"Stop acting so weird!" Darleen said. "Anyway, you're here now. Let's go. I want you to come with me to get the gloves."

"Okay," said Scott agreeably. He began walking beside Darleen. "Are we going to the mall?" he asked.

Darleen narrowed her eyes at him. "Why would we do that?"

Scott stopped walking. "But you said . . ." He looked at Darleen, puzzled. "Didn't you say you wanted to buy some gloves?"

"No!" Darleen yelled. "I said I want to get the gloves," she added in a fierce whisper. "The scarecrow's blue leather gloves!"

Scott gazed at her blankly.

"Scott?" Darleen said. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," Scott answered. "I just have a headache. A really bad headache." He adjusted the red cap on his head.

Darleen felt bad for yelling at Scott. But he sure was acting strange. "Is that baseball cap too tight or something?" she asked.

"No," Scott said quickly. "It's fine. Um . . . I have to go."

Darleen watched him walk across Maple Street. Then she walked to Melanie's house and rang the bell. Melanie's mom opened the door. "Hi, Mrs. Lin," Darleen said. "I've brought Melanie's assignments. How's she feeling?"

Mrs. Lin shook her head. "Not great," she said. "She's lost her voice completely."

Darleen shook her head. "Tell her I hope she's feeling better."

Darleen crossed the street, stopping in front of the Swofford house. Nobody had taken the scarecrow's gloves. It seemed too good to be true. Once more, Darleen felt her heart speed up.

She stepped back. The gloves were great-looking. But the scarecrow was scary. Too scary. Darleen turned and hurried home.

On Halloween morning, Darleen woke up and raced to the window. The sun was shining. The sky was cloudless and blue. Darleen thought it didn't seem much like Halloween.

But at least the scarecrow was still there. And so were his gloves.

After breakfast, Darleen waited on her front porch for Scott. He didn't show up. Finally she walked back inside and phoned him.

Scott's mom picked up. "Oh, Darleen." Mrs. Grant sounded upset. "I should have called you. Scott isn't going to school."

"Does he have the flu?" Darleen asked.

"No, he must have hit his head," Mrs. Grant told her. "He keeps complaining about a very bad headache. And he seems very forgetful. I'm worried it might be a concussion."

"That's awful!" Darleen said. "Poor Scott!"

She told Mrs. Grant she'd pick up his assignments. Then she started off to school on her own.

But in front of Mr. Swofford's yard, she stopped. Her heart began to flutter. She had to get those gloves. She had to! She couldn't sit through another day at school thinking about them.

Darleen took a deep breath. She opened Mr. Swofford's rickety gate. She walked through the knee-high weeds. With every step, it became easier.

Why on earth had she been afraid? She wasn't

afraid now as she plucked off one glove, then the other. She slipped her hands into the gloves. There! They were on now. They were hers.

They felt great. She thought they looked great too. But it was hard to see them in the fading light. Very hard.

As she struggled to focus, she felt something scratchy brush her cheek.

“Hey — let go!” Darleen cried. “Let go of me! Stop! Let go!”

But the strong hands held on. Gripped her tighter. Tighter.

Then everything faded to a deep blackness.

When Darleen opened her eyes, Scott and Melanie were staring down at her. Darleen blinked several times. The trees and sky spun above her. She realized she was sprawled on her back on the grass.

“We’re sorry,” Scott said before Darleen could open her mouth to speak.

“Yes. Really sorry,” Melanie added, leaning close. “We didn’t mean for you to faint.”

“Huh? Faint? What?” Darleen slowly sat up.

“It was a joke,” Melanie told her. “We didn’t think you’d really believe that the scarecrow grabbed you.”

“A joke?” Darleen still felt dazed. She stared down at the gloves on her hands. “A joke? What are you two doing here?”

Scott shook his head. "We knew you'd come for the gloves. So we hid behind the tree. Then I crept up behind the scarecrow and grabbed you."

"But, Scott — your mom said you had a concussion. And Melanie, your throat — it was dry as straw, and you lost your voice —"

"All part of the joke," Melanie confessed. "Scott and I were faking."

"Melanie and I put up the scarecrow," Scott told Darleen. "And we dressed it. That's why everything fit us so well. We knew you wanted those gloves, so —"

"But — why?" Darleen demanded. "Why did you go to all that trouble?"

Scott shrugged. A grin spread over his face. "You said Halloween was boring. So . . ."

"We decided to give you an *unboring* Halloween this year," Melanie declared.

"I can't believe it," Darleen said, shaking her head.

"It's true," Melanie insisted. "Scott and I faked the whole thing. We did everything."

"Then why is the scarecrow smiling?" Darleen demanded.

"Huh?" Scott and Melanie spun around to stare in shock at the scarecrow's pillow head.

Which now stared blankly back at them with a wide, red grin across its face.

AWESOME ANTS



My friend Ben and I were doing our science homework a week after Halloween when the package arrived. I heard the doorbell ring and I looked out my bedroom window. A huge delivery truck was parked in the drive.

"I'd better get that," I told Ben. "My parents aren't home from work yet."

Ben followed me downstairs. A man with a clipboard stood waiting at the door. "Delivery for Dave Warren," he said.

"That's me!" I answered excitedly. I couldn't believe it. I *never* got any mail.

The delivery man pointed to the clipboard. "Sign here," he said. "On the line right across from Awesome Ants, Inc."

Then I remembered. I had sent away for an ant farm. "I've been waiting for this for weeks!" I told Ben.

"Waiting for what?" Ben asked as I signed for the package.

"The ant farm I ordered from the back of one of my comic books," I explained. "You know. We have to do that science project for Mr. Lantz. My project will be observing ants."

"Giant thrills," Ben said, rolling his eyes. Ben is not into insects. But our teacher, Mr. Lantz, likes insects a lot. Mr. Lantz thinks anything with six legs is a genius!

"So where do you want it?" the delivery man asked.

"Uh, just bring it in the house," I said. "I'll take it up to my room."

The man gave me a strange look. "I don't think that's going to work," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"See for yourself," the delivery man answered.

Ben and I followed him around to the back of his truck. He opened the big double doors. Then he lowered a ramp that led to the ground and climbed into the back of the truck.

A second delivery man climbed out of the front of the truck. He jogged up the ramp to help his partner. Ben and I heard some shuffling. Then the two men started to grunt and groan.

"This is really weird," Ben said.

We heard more grunting. Finally the two men pushed a huge carton to the back of the truck and down the ramp.

It was bigger than my dad's pool table!

"Wait a minute!" I yelled. "There's got to be a mistake! I ordered an ant farm. This can't be —"

The driver pointed to the address label on the package. "There's no mistake," he said. "The package is from Awesome Ants, and the label is made out to you. So, where do you want it?"

"Uh . . . could you put it in the backyard?" I asked.

The two men pushed and pulled. At last they got the giant carton into the yard. They set it down across from the picnic table.

The delivery men walked back to their truck. "Oh, I almost forgot," the driver said. He pulled out a smaller box, about the size of a basketball. "This package goes with the big one. It's for you too."

Maybe that's the ant farm, I thought. I took the smaller box and stood there, watching the truck drive off.

"What are you waiting for?" Ben cried. "Let's unwrap all this stuff!"

So we did. We went to the backyard and we tore off the brown paper that covered the enormous package. Sure enough, inside we found a *giant* ant farm.

The "farm" had clear plastic walls. It was filled halfway to the top with pale reddish sand. It was great. But I couldn't believe how big it was.

"This is *way* weird," I said nervously.

“What’s in the smaller box?” Ben asked.
I opened it and found a letter at the top. It said:

Dear Customer,

You have been chosen to help us test our new *Super Jumbo Awesome Ant Farm* — at no cost to you! Let us know how your colony develops.

We think you will have an Awesome experience!

Awesome Ants, Inc.

“That’s great!” Ben said. “That’s like winning the lottery.”

Inside the box I also found a little white plastic container. The label read ANTS. OPEN CONTAINER. SHAKE INTO SAND IN FARM. I also found a large plastic bottle in the box. Its label read AWESOME ANT FOOD. ADD 5 GEL CAPS PER DAY TO ANT FARM. WARNING: DO NOT FEED THE ANTS ANYTHING ELSE!

Ben opened the ant container and peered inside. “Totally normal ants,” he reported.

He handed me the container. He was right. The ants were tiny. Some were black and some were red. They looked like the kind you see anywhere.

I looked at the ants. Then I looked at their gigantic home.

“I’ll never be able to find them in there,” I said, pointing to the farm. “They’ll get lost.”

"And you won't be able to take the ant farm to school and impress Mr. Lantz, right?" Ben said. "You want to do an ant project because Mr. Lantz says ants are the best engineers in the world. You just want to be the teacher's pet!"

"Give me a break!" I told Ben. "I just like ants."

"Well, then put them in the ant farm," Ben urged.

I opened the lid and shook the ants out of their container. Just as I thought, they seemed to disappear in the sand.

Then we opened the big plastic container of food. It was filled with blue gel caps. "These are bigger than the ants," I said. "They look like blue vitamins. What ant is going to eat a blue vitamin instead of food?"

Ben shrugged. "Maybe the ants like them. If they don't, we'll feed them a moth or a caterpillar. Ants like to eat other insects."

I dropped five blue gel caps into the farm. Then I peered through the clear plastic walls. I found all the ants huddled in one corner.

"They're not eating the food," I said. "They're just sitting there."

"Maybe they're not hungry," Ben replied.

"There! One is walking over to a gel cap!" I said. I was getting excited about observing the ants. I wanted to write an amazing science report for Mr. Lantz.

Maybe I could prove that huge ant farms were good for ants. Or bad for them. Or *something*.

Ben and I watched the ant farm until it got dark. The ants were pretty boring. They didn't eat any of the food. And they hardly moved. What was I going to put in my paper?

The next day Ben stopped by my house after school. I was out back observing the ant farm again. Nothing was happening.

"Ants are really smart and well organized," I said to Ben. "They're supposed to build a room for the queen and places for the eggs. These ants haven't done anything!"

"That's because you're only feeding them those blue gel caps," Ben argued. "Ants eat bread crumbs and pieces of hamburger and other bugs. Stuff like that."

Ben walked over to one of the trees in the backyard. He found a caterpillar on a branch. "Here. Let's give this to the ants," he said. "Maybe real food will help."

"No! Don't!" I cried. "The instructions said not to feed them anything but —"

Ben wasn't listening. He carried the caterpillar to the ant farm.

I started after him. "Ben — no!" I shouted.

But before I could stop him, he dropped the caterpillar into the farm. I ran over to see what would happen. I saw the ants turn toward the caterpillar. Then they swarmed all over it.

"See?" Ben demanded. "Awesome Ants need real food. Now they'll start building tunnels, and you can impress Mr. Lantz after all."

I decided Ben was probably right about the caterpillar. I mean, the ants looked pretty excited about it.

Before I went to sleep that night, I took some cookie crumbs out to the ants. And a few little pieces of apple. And one of my mom's leftover meatballs.

The next morning, I checked the ant farm before I went to school. The ants were doing just what they were supposed to do. They were clearing spaces for rooms. The rooms were all connected by tunnels in the sand. And the ants were very busy, rushing back and forth.

"This is excellent!" I told the ants. "I wonder what would happen if I stirred up all the sand and ruined your tunnels. Maybe I'll try that after a few days — to see if you rebuild. And I want to take some of you to school. Mr. Lantz will help me look at you under a microscope."

I don't know if the ants heard what I was saying. But they slowed down while I talked.

I sat down at the picnic table and wrote some notes about what I fed the ants and how active they were. Maybe it was my imagination, but the ants looked bigger. I made a note of that too.

Then I reached in, pulled out a few ants, and

dropped them into a paper cup. Carrying them carefully, I hurried to school.

I took notes on the ant farm for a week — in the mornings and just before dark. I fed the ants table scraps every night. I threw in some more blue gel caps. But the ants never touched them. They knew what they liked.

I also measured the ants. I held my ruler up against the clear plastic. The ants were definitely getting bigger. Some of them were over an inch long!

That weekend I couldn't watch the ant farm. My parents and I visited my grandmother's house. On Friday afternoon I left the ants lots of food scraps. I even gave them some of my left-over Halloween candy.

When I woke up Monday morning, the house was really quiet. My parents had left for work early.

I dressed quickly and went downstairs. I ate a couple of doughnuts. Then I grabbed my books, and a handful of cereal for the ants, and went out to the backyard.

I dropped the cereal into the sand. But something was very wrong. I couldn't see any ants in the tunnels!

I peered through the plastic walls. The chambers and passageways were still there. But they were all empty!

I sat at the picnic table in a daze. The ants were gone. All of them. My science project was doomed without them.

By the time I checked my watch, it was almost nine o'clock. I threw my book bag over my shoulder and ran all the way to school.

The halls were empty when I finally got there. I told myself it was because everyone was already in class. I'd never been this late!

I wondered if I should go to the office for a late pass. But science was first class, and I decided to go to class. Mr. Lantz was pretty nice. Maybe he'd just let me in.

I walked down the silent hallway. My heart was pounding. My footsteps echoed like drumbeats. I opened the door to Mr. Lantz's classroom — and gasped in surprise.

The room was empty! No students. No Mr. Lantz.

Was there a field trip I'd forgotten about?

No. I saw books lying open on all the desks.

Where was everyone? Even the two pet guinea pigs in the back of the classroom were gone from their cages.

Then I heard a noise from the back of the classroom.

A quiet, scratching noise.

There were two closets at the back of the room. I opened the first one. And saw nothing but stacks of textbooks.

Then I was sure the scratching came from the second closet. That was where Mr. Lantz kept all his science supplies.

I heard more scratching. Then I heard a clicking sound.

I took a deep breath and opened the closet door.

There stood a red ant! Half a foot taller than me!

Its two red antennas began to wave wildly.

One of them brushed my face.

I screamed.

I couldn't move. My muscles all froze.

The ant opened and closed its giant jagged jaws. The clicking sound! That's what had made it. Then the ant rubbed its two front feet together — making the scratching sound I had heard.

Before I could shut the closet door, the monster staggered out.

My muscles unlocked. I began to stumble backward. I didn't take my eyes off the creature. I banged into a desk. The ant lurched closer.

Its eyes were on the sides of its head. I was in front of the ant. Could it see me?

The long feelers snaked toward me again. I gasped as they touched the sides of my face.

Then the ant leaned over me. Its upper legs reached out to grab me.

Run! I told myself. *Run for your life!*

I turned and raced out of the room and down the hall.

I ran so fast, I fell and slid along the floor to the end of the hall. Then I picked myself up and scrambled out the side door of the building.

I stood still for a second, catching my breath.

Then I heard the heavy door creak open behind me. I turned to see the giant red ant lumbering out of the school.

I ran for the high, thick hedge at the side of the school yard. I headed for the narrow, secret opening in the hedge that I knew was there. I squeezed through the opening to the vacant lot on the other side of the hedge.

I stopped again. I was hidden from the ant.

What next? I had to get help.

I didn't have time to think. I heard the hedges rustle.

I looked up and saw a long, skinny ant leg reaching over the top of the hedge.

Then another leg. And then the slender feelers waving and reaching.

I turned and ran down the street as fast as I could. I ran so fast I thought the muscles in my legs would snap. So hard that my sides ached.

But I heard it close behind me.

Six ant feet tapping against the pavement.

The jagged jaws clicking.

I didn't turn back. But I could hear it.

I knew it was getting closer.

When the feelers poked at my arms, I screamed.

Then two of the spindly red legs closed around my waist. I felt myself lifted up in the air.

The ant was so huge! Its head was so huge! Its jaws opened wide.

I kicked and screamed, struggling to free myself.

The jagged jaws closed around my waist.

To my shock, the ant didn't hurt me. It just held me.

Then the creature plodded off in a familiar direction.

I was helpless. I couldn't get away.

It carried me straight to my backyard.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Our yard was filled with giant ants. Black ones. Red ones. They were standing in long, straight lines.

They were waiting for something.

The red ant set me down gently on the grass.

Within seconds, a circle of big black ants had me surrounded.

Were they closing in to attack?

I shut my eyes. I could hardly breathe.

And then I felt something pressed against my mouth.

I opened my eyes and saw a black ant holding one of the blue gel caps. It was trying to force me to eat it.

I twisted my head to the side. But two ants held me.

The red ant's spindly forelegs pried my jaws open. It placed the gel cap in my mouth, at the back of my throat.

I gulped. And felt the blue pill slide down my throat.

Instantly, I felt dizzy. So dizzy that I crumbled to the ground.

Then everything went black.

When I slowly opened my eyes, I heard voices. I blinked several times, struggling to focus.

I saw faces above me. Familiar faces. "Mr. Lantz!" I cried. "Ben!"

Was the whole science class there? Yes.

"Hey —" I choked out. I sat up. Where was I? The ground was soft. Sandy.

Whoa! I was sitting in red sand.

I started to stand up — and banged my forehead on something hard. A wall. A wall of clear, hard plastic.

"Mr. Lantz — where are we?" I cried, rubbing my forehead.

"Those ants you brought to school," he said. "They grew so fast, Dave. They grabbed us all. They put us all in here."

"In where?" I demanded, still dizzy.

I peered out through the plastic wall. And I saw the giant ants staring in at us. Studying us.

And I knew where we were. We were *inside* the ant farm.

"Mr. Lantz — get us out of here!" I wailed.
"How do we get out? How?"

He scratched his head. "I'm not sure. I guess we'd better get busy."

"Excuse me?" I cried. "Busy?"

"We don't know how long we have to stay in here," the teacher replied. "So we'd better get to work. We'd better build rooms for ourselves. And tunnels to get to the rooms. Come on, everyone. Get to work!"

"But — but —" I sputtered.

"It will be a wonderful learning experience," Mr. Lantz said. "Don't you agree?"

"Awesome," I replied.

PLEASE DON'T FEED THE BEARS



"Mom! Can't we stop at Monster Mansion? Please?" I whined.

I usually don't whine, but this was an emergency. I was stuck in the car with my family, on my way to having the worst weekend any twelve-year-old ever had. I had to try something to change things. Even whining.

"Sarah!" my mother snapped. "Stop complaining. We've been through this a thousand times. *Monster Mansion is too scary for your little sister.* We're going to Cuddle Bear Land — and that's final!"

Cuddle Bear Land! Can you believe it? I could just hear the kids at school shriek and howl when I told them where I went this Halloween weekend.

No dressing up for Halloween. No trick-or-treating. No great candy to eat with my best friend, Lindsey.

None of that. Because we were going to Cuddle

Bear Land — a place for babies. Of course, that's *why* we were going there.

You see, I have a really bratty five-year-old sister named Katie. Well, most people call her Katie. My parents call her Princess — because she's so precious, they say. I say it's enough to make you puke.

Katie has a way of getting everyone to do whatever she wants. And it's usually something I *don't* want to do.

Princess doesn't like scary places. She wanted to go to Cuddle Bear Land.

So — that's where we were going. Cuddle Bear Land. Yech.

My mother handed me a Cuddle Bear Land brochure. "Here. Read this," she suggested. "Cuddle Bear Land has rides for kids of all ages."

I grabbed the flyer from her hand. It was filled mostly with pictures of giant, furry bears. Bears shaking hands with grown-ups. Bears hugging little kids. Bears serving lunches on bear-shaped trays. Bears waving as they rode on a roller coaster.

Then I noticed a picture of the Forest Shopping Village. Store after store filled with stuffed bears in all sizes.

I didn't want to like anything about Cuddle Bear Park. But those bears looked pretty cool. I hated to admit it — but I really wanted one.

I handed the brochure back to my mother.

"Hey, Mom, check out those great stuffed Cuddle Bears. Can I get one?" I asked.

My mother sighed. "Sarah, I've told you before. Cuddle Bear Land is very expensive. There will be no souvenirs on this trip."

Great. Now I had *nothing* to look forward to.

"Will that be cash or charge, sir?" a huge brown bear dressed in jeans and a Cuddle Bear Land T-shirt asked my father.

My father handed him a wad of cash. The bear smiled at me and my sister. "Have a *bear-y* good time, girls," he joked. "And don't forget to try a bag of our yummy Honey Crackers before you leave."

Ugh! This place was too cute for words.

"Mommy! I can't wait to meet more Cuddle Bears!" Katie cried.

"Our Princess is so excited," my mother whispered to my dad. "Isn't that adorable?"

I studied my map of Cuddle Bear Land. The roller coaster was on the other side of the park. "Let's start at the Roarin' Roller Coaster," I suggested.

Princess batted her big blue eyes. "Roller coasters are so scary," she whispered to my parents, with just the right amount of phony fear in her voice. "I want to meet the bears and have them sign my autograph book."

I was prepared for that. "Hey, Dad, can I go on

the roller coaster by myself?" I pleaded. "I can meet up with you guys later."

My parents gave each other the "it's-okay-with-me-if-it's-okay-with-you" look. Finally, my mother nodded. "But be sure you meet us for lunch at the Hibernation Rest Center at one-thirty," my father told me.

I checked my watch. Twelve o'clock. An hour and a half on my own! An hour and a half without the *Princess*! Yes!

I slipped the park map into my backpack and raced off to the Roarin' Roller Coaster.

As I walked through the park, the sun beat down on my head. It was really hot here. I rolled up my shirtsleeves and tied the bottom of my shirt in a knot above my stomach. Then I pulled out the map to make sure I was walking the right way.

A tall, skinny Cuddle Bear in a rhinestone-covered sweatsuit strolled over and swung her arm around me. "Need some help?" she asked.

"Um, yeah. Can you tell me which way to go to the Roarin' Roller Coaster?"

"I'll walk you there," the tall bear said.

A personal tour of Cuddle Bear Land? Not what I had in mind. "Uh, no thanks. Why don't you go somewhere and take a break? Maybe have some lemonade or something?" I suggested.

“Bears don’t drink lemonade,” the bear said. “But we eat Honey Crackers.” She held out a bag of cookies. “Want some?”

They looked like graham crackers. I shook my head.

“Okay, but they’re yummy!” the bear said. Then she turned and pointed to my left. “The roller coaster is over there, just past the Unbear-able Flying Bear ride.”

I followed the Cuddle Bear’s directions to the Roarin’ Roller Coaster. The ride was great! It had three intense loop-the-loops, and I rode on it five times!

The fifth time I got stuck sitting next to a really chubby Cuddle Bear in a jean jacket. He took up more than half the car. “Aren’t you supposed to be working?” I asked him.

“Lunch break,” he replied.

Lunch break. Oh, no! I forgot to watch the time. I checked my watch. One o’clock. I could still make it to the Hibernation Rest Center by one-thirty. No problem.

I pulled the map from my backpack and found the quickest route back — Honey Comb Lane.

I walked and walked on Honey Comb Lane. It went on forever. I checked my watch. Ten minutes past one. Only twenty more minutes before I was supposed to meet my family. If I showed up late, my mother would be furious!

I started running and reached a fork in the road. I glanced at the map to see which path led to the Hibernation Rest Center.

Funny. The map didn't show any fork in the road.

What do I do now? I wondered.

I chose the path to the right. It was lined with the most beautiful fall flowers I had ever seen. I walked along the path for a while, admiring all the bright colors. But before I realized it, the flower path ended. I was standing in the middle of a thick forest.

No signs posted anywhere.

I had no idea where to go.

I studied the map again. No forest on it. I'll walk a little farther, I decided. There *has* to be a path here somewhere.

I was going to be late. I started to run.

The tree limbs swiped at my arms and legs. They beat against my face. But I didn't stop. I just kept running.

I called out for help.

No one answered.

I bet there are lots of kids who disappeared in this forest, I thought with dread. A forest where no one can hear you scream.

Then I heard something.

A shrill wail.

Kids shrieking. Crying out for help!

I had to see who it was. I had to help them. I

crashed my way through the trees, following the cries.

I charged up a hill. When I reached the top, there it was — the Roarin' Roller Coaster! With lots of kids on it, screaming. Screaming and shrieking with laughter!

I felt like such a jerk. I had gone all the way back to where I had started.

Well, at least I found Honey Comb Lane again. This time, I thought, I'll be sure to take the path to the left.

That's when I saw the sign:

THE CAVE: CAUTION. EMPLOYEES ONLY.

I wish I had noticed that sign before. I could have stopped in and asked for directions. Well, that's what I'll do now, I decided, because I'm really late.

I stepped into The Cave.

It was definitely the wrong thing to do.

The Cave was sort of a workers' lounge. There were Cuddle Bears and more Cuddle Bears everywhere you looked. Cuddle Bears playing cards. Cuddle Bears reading newspapers. Cuddle Bears listening to radios.

"Excuse me," I called out. "Can anyone show me the way to the Hibernation Rest Center? I'm a little lost."

A teenage Cuddle Bear in a black Lycra miniskirt made her way across the room. "Hi! I'm Kira," she said. "Maybe I can help."

"I was following Honey Comb Lane," I explained. "And somehow I wound up here."

A grumpy old Cuddle Bear raised his eyes from his newspaper. "Sooner or later all roads lead to The Cave," he mumbled.

"Don't listen to Charlie," Kira said. "He never makes any sense." Then she asked me my name.

"Sarah," I replied.

"With or without an *h*?" she asked. She opened a closet full of hats.

"With."

Kira pulled out a brown hat with two fuzzy ears on top. It matched the ears Kira wore, except across the front of hers it said KIRA. She lowered the hat with SARAH on it over my hair.

"Thanks," I muttered. "Can you help me get to the Hibernation Rest Center? I'm supposed to meet my family there for lunch at one-thirty. I'm already twenty minutes late. And I'm starving."

"Well, then, have a cookie!" Kira held out a bag of Honey Crackers.

"Okay," I said. "I'll have just one. Then I really have to find my way back."

I took a cookie from the bag. It was really good. I gulped it down.

"Want another?" Kira asked.

"No. No thank you," I said. "I have to get going."

"Come on," Kira urged with a big smile.

"I'm sorry. But I really have to find my parents — or I'll be in big trouble." I started toward the door. "Can you tell me which way to the Hibernation Rest Center?"

"Sure," Kira replied. "But first, you have to have another cookie."

I sat down next to Kira and gulped down another Honey Cracker. "Okay." I jumped up. "Which way do I go?"

"Come on." Kira laughed. "You have to eat the whole bag."

I'm never going to find my way back, I thought — unless I eat all these stupid cookies.

The other Cuddle Bears smiled at me and nodded as I popped two more into my mouth.

The room suddenly felt hot.

I slipped off my backpack. I glanced around for a soda machine, but didn't see one. I took another swallow of a Honey Cracker. A bead of sweat trickled down my nose. I lifted my arm to wipe it away.

And screamed.

A patch of thick, brown hair covered my elbow.

No. Not hair. Fur! Bear fur! The same bear fur that covered everyone else in the room.

I touched my hand to my face. My nose felt cold, and a little wet.

Just like an animal's nose.

"I-I'm turning into a bear!" I stammered.

The Cuddle Bears all grinned. "Have another cracker," one suggested.

"Yeah! Go ahead. Grab a handful," Kira urged. "Everyone in Cuddle Bear Land lives on Honey Crackers."

The Honey Crackers!

With every bite of the cracker I was becoming a Cuddle Bear!

No wonder the bears never took their costumes off. They weren't wearing costumes!

I bolted for the exit.

"Hey! Wait!" Kira raced after me. "You forgot this." She was holding my backpack. I snatched it from her and ran.

I ran until my lungs felt about to burst.

I have to stop, I thought. I have to catch my breath. I ducked into the doorway of a souvenir shop and slumped against the door.

Did I look like a bear? I wondered. I felt my face and neck.

No. They didn't feel furry. I didn't eat enough crackers to change into a bear, I told myself. They wanted me to eat the whole bag.

I reached into my backpack to find the map — and screamed.

A bag of Honey Crackers! In my backpack!

"I bet Kira stuffed them in there." I started to hurl them away. Then I changed my mind.

As soon as I get home, I'll take them to my doctor, I thought. Maybe she'll be able to find a cure. Something to make me completely human again!

I rolled my shirtsleeves down to cover my furry elbows. Then I took off.

I heard Princess as soon as I reached the Hibernation Rest Center. Her voice isn't hard to miss.

"But I want a Chocolate Poppa Cuddle Bear Pop, Mommy!" she whined. "You *know* I love Poppa Cuddle Bear. He's my fa-a-a-vorite!"

My mother glanced at her watch. "Sarah! Do you know what time it is? You're an hour late. And our little Princess is very hungry."

I hadn't exactly expected a happy welcome, but this was ridiculous. I thought about telling Mom about The Cave. But she would never believe me.

"I'm sorry. I got a little lost," I explained quietly. I dropped my backpack on the picnic table.

"I want furry ears like Sarah," Katie whined, pointing to my head.

Oh, no! I'm turning into a bear! My hands flew up to my head. I touched my ears — my furry ears. The ears on the cap with my name on it. The cap Kira had given me. I let out a long sigh.

It was just a furry cap.

I wasn't a bear. I wasn't a bear.

As soon as we got home on Sunday night, I ran up to the bathroom and checked my reflection in the mirror. No fur. What a relief.

I couldn't believe Cuddle Bear Land turned out to be scarier than Midnight Mansion. I shuddered. *A lot scarier.*

I checked myself in the mirror one more time before heading for my bedroom.

I found Katie sitting on my bed, grinning.

"What are you doing in here?" I snapped. "Go sit in your own room."

"I found this bag of crackers in your backpack," she replied. "And I didn't save you any. I ate the whole bag. Ha!"

I stared at her. And then it was *my* turn to laugh.

I had my souvenir Cuddle Bear after all.

She's so precious — I think I'll call her Princess.

THE GOBLIN'S GLARE



The goblin was hideous. He smiled up at me from the floor of my bedroom. He had hairy warts all over his face. Green scales covered his arms. His dirty fingernails were long and pointy.

"Boy, I'm glad this goblin is only made of construction paper!" I said to my friend Karen. "He's the scariest thing I ever drew."

"He's very creepy," Karen agreed, staring at the goblin. "Totally cool! The trick-or-treaters will really freak out tomorrow night when they see him!"

Karen and I are best friends. We're in the same class. Her favorite subject is science. Mine is art.

Someday I'm going to be a well-known artist. I, Mike Mason, will be famous all over the world. Famous for my gross and scary paintings.

But for Halloween I figured I could just be famous all over the neighborhood. The goblin was

for the front door of my house. I wanted to make it so frightening it would give people nightmares.

Karen was sitting at my desk working on our costumes. We were both going to be werewolves. Mom had given me an old fake fur coat that we cut up. Karen was gluing the pieces of fur onto two old sweatshirts and two old pairs of bicycle shorts.

I turned back to my goblin to add some more warts. But after working a few minutes, I let out a sigh.

"What's wrong?" Karen asked.

"My goblin is scary, but I want him to be *terrifying*," I complained. I ran my hand over my short blond hair and stared hard at the goblin. "Wait a second. I see what's wrong. His eyes are too droopy. He can't be really scary if he looks so sleepy."

Karen watched as I dipped my brush into some white paint.

"Wake up! Wake up!" I shouted at the goblin. I held the brush over his face. "You have to be the most horrifying goblin to haunt the neighborhood."

Then I painted HUGE white eyeballs over its old sleepy ones. I added a black dot at the center of each eye.

The effect was awesome. It made the creature seem really angry. Even a little crazy.

"You are such a good artist," Karen said. Then she picked the goblin up carefully. She didn't want to smudge the wet paint. "Come on. Let's go hang him on the front door."

I grabbed some tape, and we hurried downstairs.

Just as we were finishing, Mom came home from work. "Mike, that's a horrifying creature!" she said, shaking her head. "You'll give people nightmares."

"That's what Halloween is all about!" I answered happily. "People are supposed to have nightmares."

Mom lifted one eyebrow, as if she wasn't too happy with me.

I stared at the goblin.

His strange, buggy eyes seemed to stare right back at me. I shivered.

Maybe Mom was right. Maybe the goblin was too scary.

If only I had known how right Mom was.

"Let's go to one more house," Karen urged.

It was late on Halloween night. We had trick-or-treated all around the neighborhood. Now we were back on my block, standing on the corner.

I didn't want to stay out anymore. I had been fine all night. But suddenly, I had a somebody-is-watching-me feeling.

I glanced around. The street was empty. All the other kids had gone home. Most of the houses were dark.

"Okay, Karen," I gave in. "Just one more house."

We headed toward a house lit by a dim porch light.

We turned onto the path that led to the front door — and I screamed.

"The goblin!"

My paper goblin! It popped out of the bushes and charged at us, its long yellow toenails scraping the sidewalk.

It wasn't paper anymore!

It was alive — with thick, scaly arms, and fingernails as sharp as knives.

"Run!" I yelled to Karen. I dropped my trick-or-treat bag and took off. Karen followed.

We ran as fast as we could. But the creature ran faster. We heard its long toenails clicking on the sidewalk close behind us. Its raspy breathing echoed in our ears.

We ran for my house.

I glanced over my shoulder.

The goblin opened its mouth in an evil sneer and bolted up the walkway.

"MOM!" I screamed, pounding on the door. I could hear the creature's toenails clicking up the walk. "OPEN THE DOOR! PLEASE!"

The door swung open. “Mike! What in the world —”

“CLOSE THE DOOR!” I yelled. Karen and I leaped inside the house. “CLOSE IT — NOW!”

Mom shut the door with a loud BANG!

I bolted up in bed, gulping air. “What a horrible dream!” I moaned. My heart was pounding. I was soaked with sweat.

It was Halloween morning.

I crawled out of bed with a groan and stumbled to the bathroom. I brushed my teeth, splashed some water on my face, and tugged on my clothes.

I grabbed my backpack and hurried downstairs. After that frightening dream, I wasn’t in the mood to eat breakfast. I headed straight for the front door — to check out the goblin.

I opened the door slowly.

There he was, hanging on the other side.

I stood in front of the goblin. It seemed to stare back at me.

I took a few steps to the left.

The goblin’s glare seemed to follow me.

A few steps to the right.

Same thing.

A chill ran down my spine.

Don’t be stupid, I told myself. The goblin is a door decoration. Its eyes can’t move. It’s just an optical illusion. Or something.

After school, I headed to my locker. Karen came up behind me. "Want to walk home together?" she asked.

"Sure," I answered. "We can decide where we want to go trick-or-treating tonight."

As we walked, the afternoon light grew dim, and a chilly wind began to blow. I pulled up my collar and shivered.

But not because of the cold.

I had that creepy feeling again. As if I were being watched.

"What's the rush?" Karen asked as I began walking faster.

"Uh, I'm just cold," I mumbled.

I walked even faster.

I glanced over my shoulder — and gasped.

Karen jerked her head around.

We both screamed at the same time.

It was the goblin — for real this time!

The creature grinned its evil grin. Its crazy eyes bulged out of its sockets. It pointed its long fingernails at me and opened its mouth to speak.

But I didn't hang around to listen.

I grabbed Karen and ran.

We charged down the street. Swerved around a corner. And bolted for my house.

I could hear the goblin behind us. Scraping along. Its crusty, yellow toenails clicking on the sidewalk.

"I can't run any faster!" Karen gasped.

"Don't slow down!" I cried. I glanced over my shoulder. "It's closing in on us!"

My sides ached, but I didn't slow down. I ran up to my front door, yelling all the way. "Mom! Mom! Open the door! Let us in!"

The door swung open.

Karen and I charged inside.

"Mom! Close it — now!" I yelled.

The door shut with a loud bang.

"Close what, Mike?" Mr. Galloway, my teacher, asked impatiently.

I blinked.

The kids in my class stared at me. They laughed and snickered.

I was still in school. I had fallen asleep.

"Uh, nothing," I mumbled. "Never mind."

Mr. Galloway went on with his social studies lesson.

I couldn't believe it. I had the same awful nightmare — in class.

Two nightmares in a row.

I had to make sure this second nightmare would be the last.

Before I met Karen on Halloween night, I had something important to do. I found my art supplies. Scissors. Paper. Paint. Glitter.

A little snip. A little color. And there they were.

Eyelids!

I went downstairs and opened the front door. The goblin gave me its ugly stare as I taped an eyelid over each of its eyes. I taped each one down with five pieces of tape.

It worked. With its eyes closed, the goblin didn't look scary anymore. It almost looked peaceful.

The knot in my stomach started to relax. "Sleep tight," I told the goblin. "I know I will. No more nightmares for me!"

I put my costume on at Karen's house. I was afraid the glued-on fur was going to fall off. But we started out looking great.

Trick-or-treaters paraded all over the neighborhood. We met two other werewolves. But Karen and I were the only ones with real fake fur.

My bag was full in no time. I stuck my hand in and raked through all the candy. "Wow! I may have to go home and get another bag," I told Karen.

Then I froze. I had that creepy feeling again. As if somebody were watching me.

My heart began to thud.

"No!" I whispered. "Not again."

Karen lifted her mask. "Mike! What's wrong?"

My arms and legs began to shake. I felt hot and cold at the same time. And, suddenly, it was hard to breathe under my mask.

I yanked it off, but I still couldn't breathe. *It's*

only a nightmare, I told myself. *A dream. A bad dream.*

But this time I was going to do something about it.

This time I was going to stop the nightmare before it started.

Karen was still talking to me. I didn't bother to tell her the goblin was about to chase us. After all, it was only a dream.

I threw away my Halloween bag and started running.

"Mike!" Karen cried. "Where are you going?"

I kept running. I didn't answer.

I made it to my block and raced toward my house.

Just as before, the street was deserted.

Just as before, I started yelling, "MOM! MOM! OPEN THE DOOR!"

And just as before, the door swung open. Only a few more seconds — and the nightmare would be over.

I ran into the house. "CLOSE THE DOOR!" I yelled. "CLOSE IT — NOW!"

But this time there was no loud BANG.

The door shut quietly.

"I've been waiting for you," a deep voice growled.

It wasn't Mom standing in the front hall. It was the goblin. It pointed at me and laughed.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I demanded.

"You wanted me to be scary," the goblin replied. "So? How am I doing? Scary enough?"

"This is just a dream," I told it. "A dream. Get it? Pretty soon I'm going to wake up. Then you'll be history."

The goblin scraped its fingernails together, back and forth, as if sharpening them.

My pulse raced. Where was Mom? When was the front door going to bang and wake me up? "MOM!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. "WHERE ARE YOU? WAKE ME UP! HURRY!"

A gurgling laugh rose up out of the goblin's chest.

"Go ahead! Laugh!" I shouted. "As soon as I wake up, I'm going to rip the drawing off the front door and tear you into a thousand pieces."

The goblin laughed harder.

"MOM!" I called again.

I ran into the living room. I ran into the kitchen.

No Mom.

The downstairs office was empty.

The goblin's footsteps echoed behind me. He followed me through the house. Slowly. As if he had all the time in the world.

I ran upstairs to my room and slammed the door. I had to keep the goblin out. I needed time to think. I pushed my big bookcase in front of the door so the creature couldn't get in.

Scrape. Scrape. I could hear the goblin's toenails click up the stairs.

I backed away from the door and tripped over one of my old sneakers. I fell onto the bed.

"YEOW!" I jumped up. Something was in my bed.

I yanked back the quilt — and gasped.

There I was — in my bed! Me. Mike Mason. I was standing over my bed — watching myself sleep!

How could this be?

SCRAPE! SCRAPE!

The goblin dragged itself along the upstairs hall.

No time for questions.

I gazed down at the sleeping me.

"WAKE UP!" I shouted to myself.

BAM!

My bedroom door burst open. My bookcase fell over. Everything crashed to the floor. That noise had to wake up the me who was sleeping.

I turned back to the bed.

No. The Mike in bed still slept.

The goblin lumbered into the room.

I grabbed a shoulder of the Mike in bed and shook it hard. "WAKE UP! WAKE UP!"

The Mike in bed rolled over and pulled the covers up.

The goblin's upper lip curled into a sneer. "It's no use, Mike. You can't escape me anymore. I'm going to get you!"

It dived for me. It tripped over the bookcase and stumbled to its feet.

I leaned over the bed and grabbed the shoulders of the sleeping Mike. I shook him with all my strength. "WAKE UP! WAKE UP! MAKE THIS NIGHTMARE STOP!"

The goblin threw back its head and roared with laughter. "That won't work, Mike. You can't wake yourself up. This nightmare is not going to end."

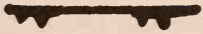
"What are you talking about?" I demanded. "I can wake myself up!"

"No, you can't, Mike," the goblin declared. "Because I'm not in *your* dream. You're in *mine*."

"Huh?" I gasped.

"You are in *my* dream," the goblin repeated. He glared at me hungrily. "And I don't plan to wake up, because we're just coming to the best part. The part where I have my dinner!"

BATS ABOUT BATS



We met Dorrie on a warm September night the week before school started. My best friend Liz and I were on our way to my house for a sleep-over.

As we reached the front yard, Liz grabbed my arm. "Did you hear that, Suzanne?" she asked.

I shook my head no.

"Listen!" Liz insisted.

I stopped and listened.

This time I heard it too — a soft flapping noise.

Then I glanced up and saw it — something big and black soaring toward my head.

"EWWWW!" I yelled.

"It's a bat!" Liz cried. "Run!"

Liz and I charged for my front door.

The bat swooped down at us. Circling us.

"It's after us!" Liz screamed. She threw her hands over her head.

The bat dived at Liz. Then it swooped low for me.

"Get away!" I screamed. I waved my arms wildly.

I felt the bat's wings scrape across my cheek.

With a cry, I threw myself on the grass face-down.

"The bat is gone," Liz said, leaning over me. Her freckled face filled with concern. "You can get up."

I rolled over and saw the girl standing next to Liz. She had pale skin, light blue eyes, and long blond hair.

"Hi," the stranger said. "Are you all right?"

"Um, sure. Where's the bat? Where's the vampire?" I asked, rubbing my cheek.

The new girl laughed — a musical, tinkly laugh. "There's no such thing as vampires," she said. "There *is* a vampire bat, though. It lives in South America — and it does drink blood."

"Oh, no!" Liz shrieked. "It's back!" She pointed at the bat soaring above our heads.

The girl squinted at the creature. "That's just a brown bat," she said. "A very pretty one."

"Pretty!" I exclaimed.

"Yeah," Liz said. "Pretty ugly."

The new girl's name was Dorrie Morrow. She told us her family had just moved into the neighborhood.

"How come you know so much about bats?" Liz asked her.

"I've always been interested in them," Dorrie

replied. "My parents are bat scientists." She glanced up, scanning the sky for the bat.

"Well, I hate them," I said. "Bats are creepy."

I invited Dorrie into my house. She stayed for a while, and we got to know her a little better. Liz and I really liked her.

After that night, Liz and Dorrie and I began hanging out together. We played softball and rode our bikes. We watched videos. We shopped at the mall together.

Everything would have been perfect — except for one thing.

Dorrie was bats about bats. It was all she could talk about.

One day after school, Dorrie invited Liz and me to her house. We couldn't believe her bedroom. The walls were plastered with pictures of bats. A big bat poster hung over her bed. Toy bats lined her bookshelf. A big stuffed Teddy Bat sat on her pillow.

"Gross!" Liz cried.

"Bats aren't gross," Dorrie replied calmly. "In fact, they're very clean animals. They clean themselves just like cats."

"EWWWW!" I cried. "What's *that*?"

"That is a bat skeleton," Dorrie answered. She picked up a clear plastic box with a tiny bat skeleton inside.

Dorrie tried to hand the box to me, but I backed away.

"I'm going to be a bat scientist some day," Dorrie said, placing the box on her desk. "Just like my parents."

I nodded.

"Bats are very helpful to the environment," Dorrie went on. "Did you know a single bat can catch six hundred mosquitoes in one hour?"

"Who cares?" Liz replied. "They're still disgusting."

"Some bats even pollinate flowers." Dorrie ignored Liz.

"Dorrie! Can we stop talking about bats?" I shouted. "I hate bats. Just talking about them makes my skin crawl!"

Dorrie shrugged. "I really don't understand it," she said. "How can anyone hate bats?"

"How can anyone *not* hate bats?" Liz said to me on our way home.

"I don't know," I said. "But I wish Dorrie would stop talking about them so much."

"Maybe she does it because she wants to scare us," Liz suggested.

"I don't think so," I replied. "I really think she likes them. She thinks they're cute. But they just make me think of vampires. I bet if she met a vampire, she'd probably think he was cute too."

Liz was silent a moment. Then she grinned. "Maybe — maybe not," she said. "Why don't we find out?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well," Liz started, "what if we invited her to a sleepover, and a vampire showed up?"

"That would be great!" I giggled. "Too bad we don't have Dracula's phone number."

"We don't need it," Liz said. "We have my brother's Halloween costume from last year — a really cool vampire costume. . . ."

We had a perfect plan. Liz promised her big brother, Mike, she'd never listen in on his phone calls again. In return, Mike agreed to play vampire.

Now all we had to do was invite Dorrie to the sleepover.

At first Dorrie didn't want to come. She didn't like sleepovers. But we bribed her. Next to bats, the thing Dorrie liked best in the world was anchovy pizza.

"Mom is going to order anchovy pizza," Liz promised. "We'll rent videos. We'll have a great time."

"Why don't I just come over for the pizza and the videos?" Dorrie asked. "My mom won't mind picking me up late."

"No way," Liz said. "You have to stay for the sleepover."

"Well, all right," Dorrie gave in.

The sleepover was on for that night!

From the minute Dorrie showed up, it was

hard for me and Liz to act normal. We couldn't wait to see Dorrie's face when Liz's brother went into his vampire act!

We ate the pizza. Then we watched the video. It was about a vampire who attacks a bunch of kids at summer camp. Really terrifying.

"Cool movie," Dorrie said when it ended.

"It was cool," I agreed. "And scary."

"I didn't think it was scary," Dorrie declared.

"Then why were you hiding your eyes?" I asked.

"I wasn't hiding them," Dorrie protested. "I was just rubbing them."

We argued for a while about whether Dorrie had been rubbing her eyes or not. Then Liz yawned.

"I'm sleepy," she said. "Let's go to bed."

There was no way I was going to fall asleep and miss the chance to see Dorrie get scared by a vampire.

Except, the next thing I knew, I did fall asleep. And the next thing I knew after *that*, an icy hand gripped my neck.

My eyes flew open. A pale face hovered over me — with long fangs and blood dripping from its lips.

"Not Suzanne!" Liz whispered. "Wrong girl!"

Mike loosened his grip on my throat. He tiptoed over to Dorrie. She lay curled up in her sleeping bag, snoring gently.

Mike slipped his hands around her neck. He lowered his head as if he were really going to bite her neck.

"AAAAAAGH!" Dorrie's eyes popped open, and she let out a high-pitched shriek.

"Be still, my leetle one," Mike said with a terrible accent.

"Let me go!" Dorrie broke free of his grasp and ran out of the room.

Liz and I laughed so hard, our sides ached. We took off after her and caught her downstairs, halfway out the door.

"It's okay, Dorrie," Liz called. "It was just a joke. It was my brother, Mike, dressed up like Dracula."

Dorrie stopped in the doorway. "How could you do that to me?" she wailed. "I thought you were my friends."

"It was just a joke," Liz said. "We wanted to convince you that bats really are scary."

"Right," I chimed in. "You've got to admit it — you were scared."

Dorrie glared at me. "I'm not admitting anything! Some friends you are!" She stomped back upstairs, collected her clothes, and then stormed out of the house.

Liz and I chased after her. "Dorrie — wait!" I called down the street. But she didn't turn back.

Liz and I went back inside. Suddenly the joke didn't seem so funny anymore.

"Do you think Dorrie will ever speak to us again?" I asked.

"It was just a joke," Liz replied. "She'll get over it."

It turned out that Liz was right. Dorrie called me the very next day.

"Sorry I got so freaked out last night," she said.

"You're not angry at us?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "It was just a joke. A good one too. It really worked."

"You're really not angry at us?" I couldn't believe Dorrie would forgive us so easily.

"No. In fact, I'd like you to come to *my* house for a sleepover. How about next week on Halloween, after we go trick-or-treating?"

Liz and I both figured Dorrie was up to something. We were sure she was going to try to get even. But we were ready for whatever she had planned.

At least we thought so.

Halloween night was dry and cool. The full moon lit up the dark, leafless trees with an eerie light.

I dressed as a gypsy, with lots of gold jewelry and a long, flowing red skirt.

Liz went as a clown. She wore gobs of clown makeup, including a big red nose. And she tied balloons to her sneakers.

We didn't have to wonder what Dorrie's costume would be. When we rang her doorbell, a huge bat opened the door.

"Dorrie!" Liz and I shrieked. "Great costume!"

Even though we hate bats, we had to admit that Dorrie's costume was awesome. She wore black, from head to toe — with big black bat wings sprouting from her shoulders.

Everyone in the neighborhood loved our costumes, especially Dorrie's. By the end of the night, our trick-or-treat bags weighed a ton. We could hardly carry them.

"Yum," Liz said, sitting cross-legged on Dorrie's bed. She stuffed an entire candy bar into her mouth.

"I'll be back in a minute." Dorrie headed to the door. "I promised I'd give some of my candy to my brother."

"Your brother?" I said. "I didn't know you had a brother."

"He stays in his room a lot," Dorrie replied. She disappeared down the hall with her bag of candy.

While we waited for Dorrie to return, we began sorting our loot into piles. Chocolate, hard candies, taffy, and non-candy.

"Did you hear that?" Liz asked, lifting her head up and listening.

"Hear what?"

"That!" She gave a little shriek and pointed.

At the open window.

Where a huge brown bat swooped inside.

"Run!" Liz screamed.

We leaped off the bed. Liz started for the door. But before she could reach it, the bat streaked into her hair!

"Help!" Liz screamed, pulling at her hair. "Get it out!"

My pulse raced. I couldn't touch that thing. I couldn't. But I had to. I had to help Liz.

The bat beat its wings against Liz's head. It wound its sharp claws around her long red hair.

I reached out fast, grabbed one of its wings, and yanked it hard.

The creature jerked its head around. It stared at me with its tiny black eyes. Then it dug its claws into my hand — and wouldn't let go.

"Help me!" I cried, shaking my hand frantically. The bat clung tightly, digging deeper into my skin. "Liz — do something!"

She did. She screamed.

She stood there screaming.

"Get Dorrie!" I yelled. "Hurry!" I whipped my arm back and forth to loosen the bat. But it only gripped me tighter.

"Stop it!" Dorrie ran into the room, shouting. "Stop it, right now!"

The bat opened its pointy snout to bite me.

I swung my arm and smacked it hard against the wall.

"Stop it!" Dorrie repeated. Her face twisted in anger. "You'll hurt it!"

"Are you crazy?" I screamed, getting ready to swing again.

Dorrie rushed over and pulled the bat off my fingers. The creature clung to her hand, practically cooing.

I stared at my raw skin. "The bat attacked us, Dorrie! It flew into Liz's hair and clawed me."

"Who can blame it?" Dorrie said. "You terrified it! Poor little thing."

I watched in disgust as Dorrie let the bat crawl up her arm. She smiled. The bat nuzzled her cheek.

"It's only a brown bat," she said with a strange smile. "Come with me. I'll put it in the basement."

I didn't want to go with Dorrie. I wanted to go home.

But I was afraid to leave. To go outside — where more bats might be waiting.

So Liz and I followed Dorrie to the basement.

She unlocked the basement door and started down the steps. At the bottom we saw another door. A dim red light shone underneath it.

Dorrie swung the door open. It was almost totally dark inside. I squinted into the deep red glow. I saw two long tables crowded with cages and beakers and test tubes.

A laboratory.

This is Dorrie's parents' lab, I realized. This is where they must work.

Liz tugged on my sleeve.

"What?" I asked, staring at a beaker that bubbled over with a strange yellow liquid.

Liz didn't reply. She tugged again.

She stared across the room — her gaze frozen on something.

I followed her stare — and gasped.

Two creatures stood hunched over a small table in the corner of the room.

Two creatures as tall as humans.

With large black ears and huge wings sprouting from their shoulders.

Two human-sized bats.

Liz and I screamed.

We whirled around and charged up the stairs.

We ran from the house as fast as we could. But we heard a fluttering behind us. Close behind us.

We turned to see Dorrie — changing into a bat. Sprouting coarse black hair. Leathery wings. Sharp fangs.

I let out a shriek.

Dorrie's bat face twisted into a smile. "Hey! Don't be scared!" she squeaked. "I told you I was going to be a scientist. Remember? A bat scientist. Just like my parents."

THE SPACE SUIT SNATCHER



My jaw dropped open as I stared at the cluttered yard. Tables piled with junk covered the lawn. Antique milk bottles in different colors were stacked in a pyramid on one table. Boxes and boxes of old dolls lay on another table. In the driveway stood huge racks filled with weird clothes — army uniforms, feather boas, and brightly colored bell-bottom pants.

People bustled from table to table, examining the odd collection of things. It was the coolest garage sale I had ever seen!

Best of all, it seemed that the guy running the sale was a real radio expert, just like me. He had all sorts of equipment piled into three big cartons.

I collect radios and do experiments with them. I even made a superpower transmitter that sends messages out into space!

I find all my best parts at garage sales. That's

why I made my parents stop the car when we drove past.

As I began digging through the boxes, my big sister, Tammy, tapped me on the shoulder.

"Laura, you promised to help me!" she complained, tossing her blond hair around like a fashion model. "My big science test is tomorrow. If you don't help me study before I go out with my friends tonight, I might fail it!"

"I will, Tammy," I promised. "Just give me a few minutes. This guy has some really rare parts that I could use to make my space transmitter even better."

"Oh, yeah, right . . . your outer space radio! You mean that big pile of junk you made? The one you spend hours on every night, sending messages out into outer space?" Tammy rolled her eyes. "Laura, you don't even know if that thing works!" she said.

"Wow!" I exclaimed, pulling a tangled strand of thick copper wire. "This will make my space transmitter send out an even stronger message!"

"Hurry up, Laura!" Tammy warned. "Mom's waiting in the car." Then she hurried off to look at the clothes. I pulled my jacket around me. It was getting cool. Halloween was only a few days away.

"Excuse me," said a little man with wild fluffy white hair. "Did I hear you mention a radio that sends messages into space?"

"Yes, I made it. It's sort of an experiment. . . ."
I answered, a bit embarrassed. I twirled a strand of my long red hair. "I've never gotten an answer. But I still try to make contact."

The man bent over and whispered into my ear, "Then you *do* believe in aliens?"

"Yes I do," I answered proudly.

"Well, come with me!" he said, grinning. "You see, I love radios as well. And when I was a young man, I did just what you're doing."

The old man led me into the open garage. Even more boxes were stacked in the garage. "I'm moving to California," he said. "This is where I keep all my special things. I wasn't even planning on bringing any of this stuff out!"

"Laura, what are you doing?" Tammy called, following us into the garage.

"I'm not exactly sure," I told her.

"Oh, hello there, young lady," the old man greeted Tammy. Turning back to me, he said, "For years and years I've waited for the right person to give this to."

He reached into a crate and brought out a cream-colored canvas suit of some kind. "You are the right person!"

I took the suit from him and examined it. It was canvas on the outside, but inside it was lined with a very heavy metallic mesh. It had a zipper up the back. Around the sleeves and the neck it had round metal cuffs.

"What is that thing?" Tammy asked.

"I'm not sure," I stammered as I examined the suit. "It looks like a space suit!"

"That's right!" the man shouted. "Aliens gave it to me when I was a young man. I talked with them over the radio." He was grinning from ear to ear. "Then one morning, this appeared outside my door."

Tammy elbowed me in the side. I could tell she thought he was nuts.

"They said that if I ever wanted to visit them, I should just put the suit on and they'd come and get me. Oh, wait!" he said. He turned to rummage through the crates again.

"Here," the old man said, handing me a pair of silver metallic gloves and a round black helmet with a mirrored visor. "You'll need these. I never had enough courage to put the suit on. But maybe you will. It's a gift, from me to you."

"Thanks!" I cried. "It's really cool!"

"Laura? Tammy?" I heard my mom call.

"Uh, we have to go," I said.

Quickly, the old man packed up the suit, helmet, and gloves into a big box. It was heavy!

My dad came over to buy some old books he had found. When I showed him the suit, he offered to pay for it. But the old man refused to take money.

"It's a gift! Good luck, little friend!" he said as

he shook my hand. Then he bent over and whispered into my ear, "Tell the aliens I say hello!"

"You're such a dope!" Tammy said as we rode home in the car. "Either that man was totally crazy, or he was pulling your leg big time!"

"I think it's nice that he wanted to give Laura a gift," my mom said from the front seat.

"Yeah!" I agreed. "Besides, his story might be true. No one really knows if aliens exist or not."

"Well, sweetheart," my dad said, "the chances that you have a real space suit are a billion to one!"

"I guess so," I mumbled.

"I can't believe you!" Tammy exclaimed. "You are the biggest geek in the universe!"

"You have to admit it will make the best Halloween costume ever!" I said, smiling at the box on my lap. Tammy is always calling me a geek, so it didn't hurt my feelings.

"I'll tell you one thing," Tammy said under her breath. "If I fail my test tomorrow, it's *your* fault!"

I tried to help her study. But, even though Tammy is older than me, she is just not very good at science. After a while she gave up and went over to her friend Laura's house to watch TV.

I raced upstairs to broadcast my nightly space

radio show. For my nightly broadcast, I usually play some nice, relaxing classical music. Then I talk about Earth a little bit. Every night I sign off by saying, "Peace to all" in a different language.

My radio probably looks like a pile of junk to an outsider, but I know every inch of it. It is an old CB radio I hooked up to a shortwave radio transmitter. Then I attached an amplifier I found in someone's basement.

I set it to blast right through Earth's atmosphere and just float out into space. I read about it in a sci-fi magazine.

Tammy was right, my radio might not even work, but I had faith in it. I knew it was at least sending my messages somewhere.

"*Paz a todos*," I said in Spanish into the microphone. The radio space hour was finished. I was just about to click off the superpowered space transmitter and get a sandwich when I heard an odd hum.

I heard a voice! It was deep and husky, sort of electronic sounding.

"WE ARE COMING," the voice boomed.

I jumped up. Where was the voice coming from? I opened my bedroom door. No one was in the hall.

"LAURA NESBIT, WE ARE COMING TO GET YOU!" boomed the voice. It seemed to be coming from my space radio!

I scrambled for the microphone. "Hello! Can you hear me?" I shouted into the mike.

"WE WILL CAPTURE YOU, LAURA NESBIT! YOUR DAYS OF FUN ARE OVER!"

The voice made little bumps stand up on the back of my neck. My hands became slippery with sweat. "Earth is a peaceful planet," I said, my voice trembling.

"WE ARE COMING TO GET YOU AND TAKE YOU FAR AWAY, LAURA NESBIT. NO MORE CLASSICAL MUSIC, NO MORE GARAGE SALES, NO MORE PEANUT BUTTER-AND-BANANA SANDWICHES. PREPARE YOURSELF, EARTHLING...."

My heart was beating at a thousand miles per hour. How did they know so much about me? I had never mentioned garage sales or my favorite peanut butter-and-banana sandwiches in my broadcasts.

"NO MORE MOM AND DAD. WE'RE GOING TO TAKE YOU TO EBULON.... PREPARE YOURSELF, LAURA NESBIT...." Then static muffled the connection, and the voice faded away.

I jumped to my feet. They were coming for me! What would I do?

I had never even thought about the fact that aliens might be bad or mean! I threw open my door and stepped across the hall to Tammy's room.

"Tammy! Are you home yet? The aliens made contact!" I pounded on the door.

"Laura! What are you doing up at this hour?" My dad's voice boomed through the hallway.

There was no use trying to tell him what had happened. No *way* he'd believe me. I stepped back into my bedroom . . . and locked the door behind me.

The next day at school Tammy was no help at all. I tracked her down at lunch. And I explained that an alien contacted me.

She just said, "Hardy har har!" and walked away. But maybe she was mad because she didn't do very well on the science test.

Everyone was all excited because Halloween was only one day away. Kids were passing notes in class about what costume they were going to wear. I was not excited at all. I wasn't even sure I'd be around to see Halloween!

I couldn't decide if I was going to wear my space suit or not for Halloween. Every time I thought about the alien from Ebulon, I felt all shaky.

I was too scared to do my regular space radio hour that night. I also didn't want to give them any more information than they already had.

The thought of hearing that awful voice made my palms sticky and my stomach queasy. Maybe I should just give up radios and science, I thought to myself as I lay there in bed.

That's when I heard a scratch at the window. I looked over at the window. The blinds were down all the way.

SCRATCH! came the sound again. I stumbled out of bed, over to the window. I turned the little wand to make the blinds go up.

I jumped back!

AN ALIEN! AT MY WINDOW!

I scrambled backwards. I slammed into my space transmitter, and it toppled over.

CRASH! It broke into pieces, sending a shower of sparks up.

BANG! The alien slammed his hand against the window.

The creature had a glowing orange face with folds of wrinkled, saggy skin around two giant round silver eyes.

I gasped for breath. It was so *ugly*.

SMACK! It hit its green hand against the glass!

"No!" I screamed.

I pushed myself away from the window. I backed over the broken pieces of my radio on the floor.

I had never seen anything so gross. The alien's nose was just two airholes. And its mouth was a tiny C-shaped gap. Tufts of green hair sprouted from its chin.

SCRATCH! The alien's hand grazed the window.

"MOM! DAD! SOMEBODY HELP ME!" I shouted.

It was going to get me!

The lights came on. I turned my head to see. It was my dad!

"Look! Dad!" I pointed frantically to the window.

The alien was gone.

Nothing outside but the grass and trees of our backyard.

"But there was an alien at the window!" I protested.

"Sweetheart, you must have had a nightmare," Dad said, helping me to stand up. My radio was ruined. It lay in pieces all over the floor.

"Oh, Laura, your radio," my dad said, scooping up some of the pieces. "I'm so sorry."

"It *was* an alien!" I insisted angrily.

"Shhhh, Laura. It was just a dream. We keep telling you that talking into your radio right before you go to sleep will give you bad dreams. You've been thinking about space too much. Now try to get some sleep."

I let him tuck me into bed. But I knew the alien was real. Where had it gone?

"So, are you going to wear your space suit tonight?" Tammy asked me the next morning at breakfast. "You love aliens so much, you should *be* one!"

"Not funny, Tammy," I said.

"What's wrong, Laura?" she replied. "Alien got your tongue?"

Tammy laughed at her own joke. I felt my face go red.

If she had seen that hideous alien, she wouldn't be making jokes. But I knew I couldn't tell her about it again. She would just tease me to death.

"Enough about aliens," Mom interrupted, putting the cereal boxes on the table. "What are *you* planning to be for Halloween, Tammy?"

"My friends and I are all going as cats!" Tammy said. Then she turned to me and smiled. "Hey, Laura, why don't you come trick-or-treating with us? We're meeting at the corner of Elm and Broome at five on the dot. Sound good?"

"That's great!" I said. "But I don't think I'm going as a space traveler, okay? The costume just makes me a little . . . nervous."

"Whatever," Tammy said.

That afternoon I dug around in the closet for my costume from the year before. It was a radio my mom and I had made out of cardboard. It had a big black rectangle made out of oaktag for a speaker, tuning dials made out of coffee cans, and a long cardboard antenna.

I found it folded up in the corner of the closet. It looked a little ragged, but I didn't mind.

Tammy was getting dressed at one of her

friend's houses. So I set out to meet them at Elm and Broome.

Little kids were running everywhere in their costumes. Everyone looked so happy, it cheered me up. I walked through the red and orange leaves on the ground, swinging my loot bag.

Finally I reached Elm and Broome. Tammy and her friends were nowhere to be seen. I sat down on the curb, which is hard to do when you're wearing a radio.

After a few moments, I heard footsteps. I turned to see who it was. But the radio costume blocked my sight.

I struggled to my feet. I turned and saw three or four girls dressed as black cats walking up the street toward me. Tammy and her friends.

"Hi, Tammy!" I shouted. I waved to them. I couldn't tell which cat was Tammy because they all had masks on.

THUMP! A heavy hand landed on my shoulder from behind me.

I gasped and spun around. I stared into a reflection of my own face.

A mirrored visor!

The visor of a space travel helmet.

AN ALIEN! WEARING A SUIT JUST LIKE MINE!

IT HAD FOUND ME!

My heart started pounding like a bass drum!

CRUNCH! It took a step toward me over the dry leaves.

“NO!” I screamed. I turned. Tammy and her friends were right in front of me. I pushed through them.

“Run, Tammy!” I shouted. “It’s an alien!”

THUMP! THUMP! Its footsteps thundered behind me.

The alien reached out to grab me!

SCRATCH! It scraped my costume.

I ducked onto the Smiths’ lawn and made for a break in their bushes. My bulky costume was slowing me down!

“Leave me alone!” I screamed.

I ran hard. I looked back over my shoulder.

It reached out. The gloved hand came at me. “NO!” I yelled.

The gap in the bushes, I was almost there . . . I’d slip past . . .

CRUNCH! My radio costume caught on the bushes. I was trapped!

I turned to face the terrible alien. Slowly, the visor slid up.

I remembered what I had seen in my window — the grotesque face with the droopy skin and the silver bug eyes . . .

Slowly the visor inched upward to reveal the hideous face of . . . TAMMY!

She was laughing so hard, she had tears in her eyes.

Her friends came running into the yard. They all laughed too.

"Oh, Laura!" Tammy laughed. "You are so gullible!"

The antenna on my radio costume fell to the ground, making Tammy's friends laugh even harder.

"What do you mean, Tammy?" I exclaimed. "The aliens — I heard them! Really!"

"Don't you get it?" Tammy chuckled. "It was me all along. I made a cassette and hid it in your room. The voice was Liz's brother. We used a computer to make it sound weird."

Liz nodded and giggled.

"And do you recognize this? Show her!" Tammy instructed.

Another girl pulled a mask out from behind her back. It was the alien I had seen in my window.

"I can't believe it!" I exclaimed. "I really thought the aliens were coming for me!"

I felt so dumb remembering how scared I had been. I instantly started to think of how I might be able to pay Tammy back for the prank.

"I got you good!" Tammy boasted. She stepped toward me . . .

FLASH! A blinding burst of light made me shut my eyes. When I opened them, Tammy was gone!

In her place stood a big purple blob.

The blob was about the size of a golden retriever. It glimmered and sloshed.

"Huh?" I gasped. I stared at the space where Tammy had been. My mouth hung open.

The goopy glob had streaks of gold running through it. One of the streaks opened up — and it spoke.

"We've taken your sister. She put on the suit. That means she volunteered."

"But she didn't know she was volunteering!" I protested.

"That's the law where we come from," the voice boomed sternly. "If you wear the suit, you must be prepared to come with us."

The blob began to shimmer. Silver light surrounded it. I used my hand to shield my eyes from the light.

The alien faded.

"Good-bye, Earthlings. Oh, and by the way, Laura," it burbled as it disappeared, "thanks for the radio show. But, next time, could you play some rock and roll?"

ABOUT R.L. STINE

R.L. Stine is the most popular author in America. Recent titles for teenagers include *I Saw You That Night!*, *Call Waiting*, *Halloween Night II*, *The Dead Girlfriend*, and *The Baby-sitter IV*, all published by Scholastic. He is also the author of the *Fear Street* series.

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